

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Deuteronomy 18:15-20 / Mark 1:21-28)
31.01.2021
Authority

Dear brothers and sisters,

When I read today's gospel passage to prepare this homily, I was struck by the word "authority". It comes back twice in this short text.

At the beginning, we heard: "Jesus' teaching made a deep impression on his followers because, unlike the scribes, he taught them with authority".

And at the end of the passage read, we heard: "Here is a teaching that is new and with authority behind it; he gives orders even to unclean spirits and they obey him".

This inclusion invites us to reflect upon the kind of authority that emanated from Jesus' teaching.

Unlike the scribes, Jesus taught with authority, with a personal authority.

The scribes did not speak with personal authority. They were always quoting their sources. Their authority was reliant upon the authority of others. The scribes continually referred to the great moral principles of the Law – the Torah – from which they excelled in extracting or deducing rules and regulations for every possible situation that could arise in life. The authority of the scribes consisted in teaching and transmitting the Law and developments in its interpretation. The scribes' teaching was not always a source of freedom or healing for those who listened to them. Often they placed heavy burdens on the shoulders of their listeners! In the gospels, we see Jesus reproaching them sharply for this kind of behaviour.

On the contrary, Jesus spoke with great personal authority. He spoke in the first person as one invested with God's own authority. He spoke as if he was God – and we believe that He was. I have in mind the refrain in Matthew's gospel, chapter five: "You have heard how it was said to our ancestors... but I say this to you..."

Jesus' teaching was new and refreshing. He liberated those who listened to him and brought them healing. What is clear is that Jesus' teaching was not a burden for his listeners. Far from it!

It is not by chance that, in today's gospel passage, between the two mentions of Jesus' authority, we find the narrative of the healing of a man possessed by an unclean spirit. Jesus' teaching authority and his healing ministry are shown to have been strongly connected.

Jesus' deeds – his miracles, his healings – gave authority to his words. They authenticated them. In the case of today's gospel passage, this Jesus who had just expelled an unclean spirit must have been seen as someone to be listened to; what He had to say thought to be powerful and life giving.

Jesus' words confirmed that his deeds were acts of liberation and healing and not just a manifestation of powerful rhetoric.

In this gospel passage, the authority of Jesus was also manifested in the way he accomplished his exorcism. The wonder workers of his time used to have recourse to complicated incantations or rituals in these cases. Jesus did not even touch the possessed man. Just a word from Him was enough: “Be quiet! Come out of him!” Jesus’ speech was shown to be more powerful than the unclean spirit which held the man bound.

When we speak of Jesus’ personal authority, we have to be clear. We don’t mean that Jesus operated as a free electron without roots. We don’t mean that Jesus did not know or did not take into account the religious and cultural traditions of his people. Far from it! The point to be grasped is that Jesus did not receive his authority from anywhere or anyone else than from his personal relationship with his Father in prayer. Through prayer, Jesus was able to fulfil the religious tradition of his people in a new and life-giving way; with a perspective received from His Father in prayer.

We are all called to exercise some form of authority in our lives: in our family or community life, in our work place, through our political or social engagements. There are different ways of exercising our authority. Jesus’ example should be an inspiration for us.

When we exercise authority in our daily lives, to whom do we give first place? Do we think first of others, trying to help them grow and become more and more who they are: beloved children of God? Are we trying to help others to attain freedom and bring them healing? Or do we think first of ourselves, of our own interests, using, abusing, and even exploiting others for our own selfish ends, our own profit?

True authority respects others. True authority should not be perceived as a burden, a constraint, but rather should be liberating and bring about deep inner healing. False authority paralyses us with fear and hinders us from breathing freely. True authority makes us feel fully alive and liberates our breathing.

When we exercise authority, we must ask ourselves: are we looking to the past, and just repeating the past? Are we inviting others to do things in the way we have always done them? Or are we looking to the future, trying to read the signs of the times and open new ways?

As it was for Jesus, our authority should repose on our personal relationship with the Lord in prayer. Regular prayerful reading of the Scriptures, regular encounter with the Lord in solitary prayer, regular times of prayer with our Christian community, all these elements of our prayer life constitute the soil from which we can exercise our authority in a Christian way, in a manner which sets others free and who brings them the healing for which they long and which they stand in need.