

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time, 28 January 2024

Scriptures: Deut. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 7:32-35; Mark 1:21-28

Homily: Fr. Ken

It seems that a day doesn't pass that we don't hear that TV announcement declaring "Breaking News", informing us of world events, national disturbances, or even local occurrences.

Of course, when the "breaking news" announcement indicates that the Pope or some other world leader will be speaking, the ambiance may be all the more charged up.

In the process of becoming mature, fully human persons, most people will have developed a sense of authentic authority. This begins at an early age. In school, it is teachers and school administrators who become the recognized authorities. In our own lives, as persons of religious faith, it is the priest or the theologian, or the Pope himself whose voice commands respect. In our places of employment, the bosses or supervisors have authority.

Wherever people willingly participate in an organization of any kind, those who have the responsibility for leading others are the recognized authorities.

With these ideas in mind, we turn to the Scripture readings for today—and we find there "breaking news". Writing in the late seventh century B.C., the Deuteronomist called upon the authority of the people's late, great leader Moses to promise the people of Judah that God would send them a prophet. The coming prophet should be heeded, for his words would be from God.

Given the tenuous political climate of his day, the promise of the Deuteronomist was probably a source of hope for his people. Someone would be sent by God to lead them in the ways of truth, justice, and peace.

In the Gospel, Mark takes special care to portray Jesus as one who spoke and acted with authority. But Jesus' authority was not derived from something else. Unlike the scribes, who called upon Scripture or upon famed rabbis or knowledgeable scholars, Jesus possessed authority that was his own, by virtue of who he was. Indeed, Mark made Jesus' identity clear to his readers from the very beginning. In Mark 1:1, we read, "Here begins the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God". While Jesus' contemporaries and disciples often appeared to be uncertain about his identity; and although Jesus' identity was fully revealed in Mark's Gospel only as he hung on the cross ("Clearly, this man was the Son of God", Mark 15:39, as the centurion proclaimed), Mark kept his readers in the know by including in his Gospel little glimpses at Jesus, Son of God.

The first glimpse came at Jesus' baptism. Another glimpse is offered in today's Gospel reading, where Jesus is recognized and acclaimed as "the Holy One of God". Besides teaching with authority, Jesus also acted authoritatively, proving that he, as Son of God, was more powerful than any evil spirit.

Today, we who have been called to follow Jesus are also called to enjoy a share in his authority. When we speak and act and do all things in his name, ours is an authority authentically derived from his. But if we use that authority unworthily to press for power, wealth, and control over the lives of others, then our authority is not true, nor does it reflect our belonging to Jesus.

Perhaps we might take a cue from the people in the synagogue at Capernaum long ago. They were open to listening to Jesus. They recognized he was offering them "a new teaching with authority". They were simple and humble enough to be astonished. In their amazement at what they had seen and heard, they also acknowledged Jesus' power over evil or unclean spirits.

And, in the aftermath of that event, they talked about Jesus; they were his witnesses throughout all of Galilee.

What the people experienced that day in Capernaum is also available to each and every one of us. Each time the Gospel is proclaimed, it is truly "breaking news". It deserves our attention and our respect.

But that news also comes with a challenge. Will we listen and then go away unchanged, or will we listen, learn, and be transformed by its power, grace, and authority?

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