

4th S. in OT, Yr B.

28-1-18.

He spoke with authority.

I wonder if you recognize an experience of your own in the Gospel today? Jesus has come to worship God as part of the local community in the synagogue at Capernaum, and is there given the opportunity to speak. We are not told exactly what he was talking about, but we do know that whatever he said made a deep impression on people. However, the longer Jesus spoke, the more disturbed and uncomfortable one of his listeners became, until in the end he blurted out: "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, - the Holy One of God."

What was it that Jesus was talking about to disturb this man so much? Capernaum was a very cosmopolitan town, close to the border with Syria and Lebanon, the meeting point of some important trade routes, with all the commerce and shady goings-on that went along with this. Was he a tax-collector perhaps, like Matthew, feeling guilty about some of his shady practices, or was it someone running a brothel for the convenience of travelers. The mention that this man was possessed by an unclean spirit could well point in that direction.

What Jesus was saying was certainly touching him deep down, so much so that he suffered convulsions as he recognized himself for what he was, and the struggle to get the better of these emotions left him drained and exhausted, and only the order to be quiet, and for the spirit to leave, brought him back to sanity and freedom again.

I hope none of you have ever had to struggle with your demons to that extent, but I can certainly recognize similar, less dramatic, instances in my life, and expect that you can too.

What could Jesus have been talking about? My guess is that it had something to do with God's fidelity to his covenant, the way in which God had shown his love, care and concern for his people; how he had drawn them back from going in the wrong direction through the prophets he had sent to his people, and how even now how he had been calling them on through the preaching of John the Baptist.

Given how frequently in the Old Testament God's Covenant with his people was compared to the marriage covenant, Jesus would have brought those two elements together, to talk about fidelity in married life and fidelity to the Covenant. He would have spoken about the beauty of a faithful married love, and of the joy and satisfaction this brought, - as against the heartache, guilt and abuse infidelity brought along with it, and how the same applied in their relationship with God.

In speaking like this Jesus did teach them with authority, for it placed the positive side of their relationship with God before people, rather than the casuistic way of teaching which the Scribes and Pharisees used.

And that is what we are called to today as well. Our relationship with God is not one of simply keeping the commandments, and figuring out what we can or can't get away with. It is not about commandments at all, but about returning love for love, responding to the love wherewith God has created us, surrounded us with people who loved, fed, nourished and educated us, gave us skills and abilities to do something with our life, and where disability or misfortune did strike, inspired others to reach out in compassion towards us.

On top of that He became a fellow human being for us, taught us about the love he and his Father held us in, suffered and died for us, and through the Church and the Sacraments continues to give us a way of sharing in his own divine life, until at last he can welcome us into his own joy.

It's about letting that love sink deeply into our hearts and minds, so that our response can become natural and genuine, just as it is between the best of marriage partners.

With all that in mind, today's Gospel invites us to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, - to become teachers and healers in our turn, - teachers in the way Jesus shared his knowledge of, and relationship with God, as a way of getting his listeners to reflect on their own response to God, and as healers by the way He reached out to people in their manifold needs, and with our compassion show how Jesus is still present today, still exercising his authority through the grace He has shared with us. Can we be open to that?