

The Fourth Sunday of the Season of Epiphany

Mark 1:21-28

When our Lord Jesus preached in the synagogue in Capernaum, they were *astonished at His teaching, we hear today, because He taught them as one with authority, and not as the scribes.*

To many, what really matters and makes all the difference when they hear somebody speaking is that he speaks *forcefully*, so that it appears as if he himself believes what he is saying, and there can be no doubt, no nuances; to some, that is much more important than *what* he says, whether there is any coherence or consistency to it. Some will believe anything they hear from a speaker who appears authoritative; a bit like some will laugh at anything a comedian says, whether what he says is funny or not, because they know that they are supposed to, or like some will laugh at anything a preacher says when he makes the face preachers make when they want to be funny.

The difference between the teaching of our Lord Jesus, though, and that of the scribes was not about appearances; it was not so much that He presented the teachings of Holy Scripture with greater enthusiasm or excitement than they did, that their style of teaching was less entertaining and engaging and more academic. No, the authority with which our Lord Jesus taught was the authority that was His by virtue of who He is, and always was, that He is the Son of God and God Himself from eternity, which is also the authority Holy Scripture itself has, since He is the Author of Holy Scripture, and He is also the eternal Word of God by whom and for whom all things were made, who upholds all things by His Word of power, to whom all things belong, whom all things must obey, and whom all human beings owe it to obey, and all spirits other than His own. With this authority He speaks in Holy Scripture; with this authority He taught in the synagogue; with this authority He teaches in His Church.

And with this authority *He commands even the unclean spirits*, as we also hear it today that the people in the synagogue in Capernaum said it of Him, *and they obey Him.*

This they did not say about Him, though, until after they had actually seen it happening before their very eyes, that He had commanded an unclean spirit to come out of the man the spirit was keeping captive, and when the unclean spirit had convulsed the man and cried out with a loud voice, it had come out of him.

But already before they had seen this dramatic event take place before their very eyes, it must have been apparent to them that He taught as one with authority, for, as we hear it, it was therefore they were astonished at His teaching already before they had seen Him exercise His authority upon the unclean spirit. And, again, although this was apparent, it was not merely a matter of appearances.

And clearly, they were not aware with which authority it was that our Lord Jesus spoke; after all, even after they had seen Him drive out the evil spirit, they questioned among themselves: *What is this? What new doctrine is this?*

When our Lord Jesus speaks the Word of God, which is His own Word, since He Himself is God, and is the eternal Word of God, He commands all evil and unclean spirits to loosen and let go of their grip on the hearts and minds of those who hear. Now, there are those who hear and never notice; others sense the struggle taking place within them, as they find themselves confronted with Himself and His authority, as He calls and commands them to submit to His authority and surrender to His love in the obedience of faith. Some still choose not to, though, although no longer in ignorance, but rather in deliberate defiance.

Those who are His own, though, will find themselves set free from their slavery to sin and Satan to surrender to His love instead, and allow His love and His life, alive and at work in His living Word of love, to overcome the death of disobedience and defiance in their hearts and minds and make them to submit to His salvation. As He has also said it: *My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall be able to snatch them out of my hand.*

It was this they sensed, who heard Him speak in the synagogue in Capernaum, already before they saw it happen before their very eyes that He commanded an unclean spirit to come out of the man he had kept captive, and the unclean spirit cried out with a loud voice and came out of him.

And this holds true also as He still speaks, as He does in the testimony of His faithful Church, in the preaching of the men He has placed as Pastors in particular parishes, and of whom He says: *He who hears you hears me, he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects Him who sent me.* As the holy Apostle Paul writes it, *the Word of God which you heard from us is not the word of men, but is in truth the Word of God, which is effective as it works in you who believe.*

And therefore is it, as the Apostle also writes it, although elsewhere, *that faith comes from hearing, and hearing comes through the Word of Christ.*

And therefore is it, as he also writes it, again: elsewhere, that although the preaching of Christ crucified is a *stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles*, to those who are called it is Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God; because in it He speaks, who is the eternal Word of God, by whom all things were made, and who upholds all things by His Word of power.

His Word of salvation is His Word of victory; not merely the Word about His victory, but rather the Word in which His victory really *is*, and works, and is victorious. And His victory is the salvation of sinners, for what He wills and always willed is our salvation; for so good is God that He loves us sinners, in spite of our sin, in spite of all the evil and injustice we have done against Him, and still do, with the specific sins and shortcomings in our lives, and with the sinfulness of our nature which we nurture in our hearts and minds.

Therefore is it that He had indeed come to destroy the unclean spirits, as the unclean spirit in the synagogue in Capernaum correctly stated it; well, therefore, and also because God in His whole and holy goodness hates all evil, and all impurity. For that reason alone, also, must the unclean spirits be destroyed, and shall, when the Son of God shall come in glory to enforce and implement His Kingdom of goodness in all Creation.

But more importantly, not only for us, but also for God Himself, the Son of God came to destroy the unclean spirits out of His love for us, His most beloved creatures, made in His own image, made for His love; from eternity God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit resolved to rescue us sinners from His own righteous wrath against our evil, that with our ungodliness and unbelief we have joined the evil one in his evil rebellion against God, and given ourselves over to him, along with the unclean spirits, that is: the evil angels who also joined him in his rebellion.

In His great goodness God resolved from eternity to rescue us from His own righteous wrath against our evil. Therefore the Son of God came to suffer His own judgement for us, in our stead and on our behalf. Therefore He had Himself born into our kind, and into our mortality, and baptised into us, to make Himself one with us in our sin.

He who is indeed *the Holy One of God*, as the unclean spirit correctly called Him, without sin and impurity, to whom all evil and impurity is utterly and entirely abominable, made Himself one with that which He hates so much.

And clothed and covered in our sin and impurity He had Himself crucified and cursed and condemned for it and with it, into the judgement and damnation of God, as all real righteousness requires that all sin be cursed and condemned. And with that, He has cancelled out the claim the evil one had upon us sinners, that if he is to suffer for ever in the eternal fire prepared for him and his angels, as he must, well, so must we, who joined him in his rebellion. The judgement and damnation of God has been executed upon all ungodliness and impurity of ours; He has had it executed upon Himself, and paid the price and penalty in full. And so the evil one owns us no more; we are free to live with God for ever, in the fullness of His goodness and His glory.

This is the salvation our Lord Jesus has His Church proclaim, with His own authority, which He gives to the men He places as Pastors in the parishes. And since He has paid the price, and there is nothing lacking, His Church proclaims His salvation as His *promise*, and with His promise what He promises is given, fully and for real, to all who hear His promise and take it to heart.

And He who has earned for Himself the authority to cancel out any and all claims the evil one once had upon sinners uses the same authority to break the *power* he has over us. Again, His Word of salvation is His Word of victory; not merely the Word *about* His victory, but rather the Word in which His victory really *is*, and works, and is victorious in us. With His Word of the price He has paid to make us His own, He claims us as His own before the evil one, so that the evil one must let go of his grip over our hearts and minds, and we are free to submit to Him as Saviour and surrender to His salvation.

And He Himself makes us to do that; by the power of His love, alive and at work in His Word of what His love has done for us, He draws us and drags us into His love, so that we cannot but submit to His love, in the obedience of faith, and follow His calling into a life with Him, under His love, in the Word and worship of His salvation, in which He Himself comes to us and gives Himself to us, with His salvation. Again, as He has said it: *My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall be able to snatch them out of my hand.*

He knows those who are His own; He knew us and loved us from eternity. And as He claims us as His own, He also takes us as His own, for we are that; He has paid the price for us to be that, and we belong to Him, and shall, always.

Glory be to God on high, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men! Amen.