

# 4th Sunday B

## **Authoritarian vs Authoritative**

It is probably true that most Americans do not like heavy-handed authority. We regard brutal regimes and dictatorships as a violation of human rights. So too, the subject of authority can be neuralgic at home, in the workplace, and in the Church. As a rule, we don't like to be judged and we don't like to be told what to do.

Yet, if we perceive a leader to be sincere, well-informed, courageous, and wise, we more readily listen to what he or she has to say and we may even follow that person's lead, in whole or in part. In fact, when we stop and think about it, for all our skepticism we want and need people who are authoritative – not authoritarian but authoritative – We are authoritarian when we impose our purely personal views— however ill-considered they may be – on others. We are authoritative when we are persons of integrity and compassion who attract others to truth because we know what we are talking about. In parenting and in professional life, we strive to be those persons.

## **Jesus Taught with Authority**

I mention these things as a way of understanding today's Scripture readings. In the reading from Deuteronomy, Moses is speaking to the people. They had asked Moses for no more direct communications from God because they were overwhelmed by God's power and glory. Yet they wanted to know the Word of God, so they asked Moses for a prophet. And the first qualification of the prophet was that he not impose his own opinions on the people but rather speak to people what God had commanded. The prophet was to have authority because he spoke for God and not for himself.

That request of the people for a prophet was more than fulfilled in Jesus. We find him today in the synagogue at Capernaum where he was teaching. People were amazed at what they heard Jesus say. They said of him, 'he teaches with authority and not like the scribes', and again, 'What is this? A new teaching with authority.' What did the people mean when they said this of Jesus?

Did they mean that Jesus was smarter and more competent than the scribes? The

scribes, of course, were learned commentators on the law of God. But the people didn't say that Jesus was merely a more competent scribe. On the contrary, they said he taught with his own authority. They didn't know quite what to make of Jesus; they didn't really know who he is, but when he spoke they understood he wasn't just telling people what others said; rather, he was preaching the Word of God on his own authority. They did not yet understand that, "The Word became flesh and dwelled among us" (Jn. 1:14). They did not yet understand that, "In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways ... through the prophets, but in these last days, he spoke to us through a son ..." (Heb. 1:1).

What they did understand is that Jesus' word was powerful. When Jesus spoke, the powers of evil took notice. By his word, Jesus commanded the evil spirit to depart from a tormented man. Jesus' words made inroads into the culture of sin and death, personified by the devil and his minions. Jesus' words invaded the frontiers of evil. The people exclaimed, "He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him." Perhaps they remembered the Psalm that says, "He spoke, and it came to be ..." (Ps. 33:9)... and they rejoiced!

### **The Authoritative Word**

Just as God entrusted his word to Moses and to the prophets, so too does Jesus the Word made flesh entrust his Word to us. It is not our private preserve but rather a sovereign Word, a powerful Word, given to us to continue the task of pushing back the frontiers of sin and death and ushering into our broken world, in every generation, the Kingdom of God.

At times that Word is spoke with a direct effect that exceeds all human abilities, as when a confessor says, "I absolve you from your sins ..." or when a priest says, 'This is my Body, this is my Blood, for the forgiveness of sins.' Indeed, in spite of the human weakness of God's minister, the authority of Jesus over sin and death reaches us in power of the Holy Spirit. One who absolves and consecrates must never forget his own need for mercy.

So too the Word of God reaches us through Scripture and Tradition. While new questions arise in every age, the task of the Church remains to preserve the Word of God from error, so that the Word will not be robbed of its efficacy by being recast in

our image and likeness. For we believe that when the Scriptures are proclaimed in the liturgy, it is Christ himself who speaks to us (SC, 7), just as surely as he spoke in the synagogue at Capernaum. We open our hearts to the living Word of God not as isolated individuals but as members of Christ's Body, the Church.

Yet it is not only the right but also the responsibility of every follower of Christ to speak the living Word of God and to do so with authority. And, I'm going to wager that you experience this all the time. If you are known to be a serious Catholic who knows, loves, and practices your faith, when a question about religion arises in the workplace or over dinner with friends, likely all eyes will be upon you, and you have my sympathy and support. I had a friend who was an astrophysicist at the Naval Ordnance Lab; he was a very young man at the time of the II Vatican Council in the early 60's and was the only one in his section who was known to be a practicing Catholic. He told me he was constantly being asked about the Council, just as you might be asked about Pope Francis, and many other things besides. And, of course, it is important for us know what we are talking about but it's also important for us to recognize that these are not idle conversations.

They are opportunities to attract others to Christ and to welcome others into the community of the Church.

## **Conclusion**

And thus our lives, yours and mine, must share in the authority of Christ, such that the power of sin and death are constantly being overcome in us. Years ago, Blessed Pope Paul VI said that nowadays people listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers. When people perceive that we are deeply in love with Christ and that we are intentionally narrowing the gap between what we believe and how we live, then they may begin to share the amazement of the people we met in today's Gospel, and say of us, that we speak with authority, the authority of love that comes to us in Christ Jesus, the Word made flesh!

May God bless us and keep us always in His love.