

## Expelling Falsehood

January 31, 2021, Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Gospel of Mark 1:21-28

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Both Thomas Aquinas and C.S. Lewis taught that the triumph of evil depends entirely on disguise. Our egos must see it as some form of goodness and virtue so that we can buy into it.

It is awful hard to talk about ego without talking about pride and envy. To understand humility, we need to understand pride and envy as well.

To live with humility often leads us to living more simply. When we agree to live simply, we can understand what Francis meant when he said, "a man has not yet given up everything for God as long as he held on to the moneybag of his own opinions."-- Thomas of Celano.

These quotes are food for reflection as we navigate through our readings today. Our first reading and the Gospel today both address the issue of **authority**. What **is** our relationship with authority and who **do** we listen to as our teaching office?

In the first reading Moses is the authority, the liaison between God and the people. He points out that there will be an authority that arises from the people, who the people will listen to. And he warns there will be true and false prophets. Those who speak the words God put in their mouths and those who claim to speak in God's name but speak words God has not commanded them to speak.

**Society** is often a false prophet, claiming to speak the truth, and even to be Christian, but at the same time, glorifying war, violent force, and oppressing the poor, casting aside social justice responsibilities, and nurturing the more subtle violence of forcing our ways and opinions onto others, rather than **witnessing** by example.

We just have to watch YouTube and other social media to get news about every topic under the sun. And there are plenty of channels and podcasts and blogs that address moral issues and - - there are OPINIONS GALOR.

So what is our authority and how do we apply its teachings in our lives? Where is our moral compass?

Who can we trust, with so many options to choose from?

How do we separate solid teaching from opinion and political agenda?

As Catholic Christians, **Scripture** itself is one authority - - and **the Church** which speaks authoritatively on matters of doctrine as well as on issues of personal and moral

social justice is another. The **Catechism of the Catholic Church** helps us interpret Scripture in a helpful way as well.

It's very easy for any one of us, Christian or otherwise, to get ahead of ourselves and interpret moral teachings our own way and how they should be applied to everyone else.

Remember, Jesus was himself seen as a radical compared to the accepted traditions and ways of doing things in his time. The religious authorities and Pharisees scribes turned on him for his ways. The ritual and external actions were taking over from conversion of heart and empathy and compassion for one's neighbour. Jesus spoke out strongly about this. His way shook many people up to the point that people and groups turned on Him.

Turning to our Gospel episode, notice how the disturbing reality of the person with the unclean spirit takes second place to the concern that Jesus is teaching as one with authority. What transpires through this healing act challenges the very worldview of those gathered. In Jesus' time, it was a common worldview that spirits readily interfered with or intervened in human life -- sometimes benevolently sometimes malevolently (unlike our present day Western society which seems to have a rational explanation for everything). These spirits were less powerful than God but more powerful than human beings.

In our Gospel, Jesus demonstrates he possesses powers stronger than those of ordinary human beings. And no one denied the power exhibited in casting out the unclean spirit, but the question quickly became 'Who is Jesus to be able to do this? Is it of God or of lesser spirits?'

It is **our faith** that opens us up to recognize God at work in Jesus' action - - as an action announcing the **coming of God in power** to rescue God's people. This Gospel episode today demonstrates this power.

However, human pride and envy can quickly influence our egos and get in the way, preventing people from seeing the big picture and what Good News this action is for humanity. Instead of seeing God at work, human beings in their frailty close their hearts and retreat from such a deep recognition. It's TOO MUCH. The human being reverts to the human level concerns which is ego driven. Some perhaps innocently enough - - what do we make of this? Is this of God? Maybe but we don't know.

But the problem arises when the pride and envy and fear begin to distort the perception of God's work and reinterpret the episode as the devil's work. Thoughts like, 'Who does he think he is?', 'No human being should be able to accomplish this?' And a witch hunt mentality emerges. And those who already perceived themselves as having power and who now feel threatened lead the charge.

Rescuing His people from evil power is indeed a new teaching from God in this Gospel episode, God who has supreme authority.

Ron Rolheiser points out that in the gospels the forces of evil come out in two ways: through the devil (*diabolus*) and satan (*satanus*). He states that they are not synonymous. *Diabolus* means to divide or tear apart; whereas *satanus* means a frenzied sick group-thinking that accuses somebody of something. The gospels tell us that the power of hell, satan and the devil, work in two ways, as the devil dividing us from God and each other and from what is best within us. And it can divide us within our selves - - that's where double-mindedness, hypocritical behaviour, deceitfulness, etc. comes in.

And secondly, in a partially opposite way - - as satan. This form of evil unite us to each other, but not in a good way, but through the grip of mob-hysteria, envy-induced hype, and the kind of sick unity that makes for gang-rapes, lynchings, and crucifixions. Satan uses envy to pit the crowd against an outsider.

The root of this is pride and envy. From envy we get jealousy, the sense of being wronged and the bitterness that goes with it. It breaks up families, relationships, communities, churches, and nations. It can tear an individual apart.

In Jesus we find the opposite, His first word is *metanoia* which is uttered against the power of the devil: Jesus says be un-paranoid, do not let envy and suspicion divide you from each other, from God, and from your highest self. Ego, pride, and envy are not our highest true self.

The Kingdom Jesus preaches is about coming together. Notice how Jesus resists adulation and hype. Groups of people either want him dead or they want to make him their earthly king - - neither of these is the answer.

Jesus always drew his vision and energy from a deeper source than 'what people were saying and wanting', whether they were words of praise or of criticism.

Jesus looked for guidance from above not from the crowd. He knew that 'when crowds are under the grip of amazement there is a thin line between wanting to make someone king and wanting to crucify that same person.' When group energy takes over, there will soon be a crucifixion done in God's name.

It's in the transforming power of the Spirit that we move from an ego response (which is highly susceptible to pride and envy), to gratitude for the truth of God's action for the sake of His people.

Maybe we hear the authoritative teaching of Jesus best when we hear it as a call to OUR OWN conversion, over and above ideological obsession and pushing ideals onto others.

It's in our own weakness and vulnerability, (realities about ourselves that our pride and ego tend to want us to bury or deny), that God waits for us with His healing and liberating power. Remember, we cannot receive God's grace with a clenched fist.

The Gospel episode today puts in bold relief the truth that is meant to transform our lives. It's in that transformation that God's power is mediated over evil in the world. It takes us beyond mistaking Jesus healing action as anything less than of God. It is the power of the Kingdom of God prevailing over the kingdom of satan. A community of converted people is God's secret weapon against the power of evil in the world.