

4th Sunday of the Year

Year B

The Lord, Our Teacher.

*Today we celebrate him who speaks with authority
and to whom we must give our undivided attention.*

(Readings: Deuteronomy 18: 15-20. 1 Corinthians 7: 32-35. Mark 1: 21-28.)

The somewhat imposing figure of G.K. Chesterton, the English writer and wit, was often to be seen, literally, squeezed behind a table in one of London's fashionable restaurants. Chesterton, himself, always made light of his *substantial* bulk, often joking that it gave him the consolation of being able to offer his seat in the train to, not one, but to three ladies.

Speaking at one of his many literary lunches, he expounded on the relationship between power and authority, describing the difference thus:

“If a rhinoceros were to enter this restaurant now, there is no denying he would have great power here. But I should be the first to rise and assure him that he had no authority whatever.”

Power without authority always looks dangerous, just as authority without power often looks comical.

If power is the ability to cause, or to prevent change, that is to say, to influence people and events, it is important that those who exercise it should also enjoy the right and proper authority that justifies them in what they do.

For many people, especially for those who have suffered under military regimes, power is almost invariably associated with force, and compulsion, and violence. And the power that identifies itself only with force makes victims of *all* its subjects. – That is the power of Chesterton's rhinoceros.

But, people rightly oppose power that exploits, or manipulates, or bullies people into conformity. And yet, power doesn't have to be destructive. We remember Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, and Archbishop Romero, and how they used the power of non-violence to oppose extremely powerful regimes. The fact that they were all assassinated did not belittle their power. Their *moral* authority, exercised on behalf of a suffering people, made them great and formidable forces for good. To a lesser extent, so too, with the power that parents can exercise over their children. For this is power allied to love – a force that is exerted on behalf of, and for the protection of, others.

When Mark the evangelist begins telling his story of the ministry of Jesus, he first shows us how Jesus is invested with the power of the Holy Spirit at his baptism, and thus, how he acts with authority. And the power that moves Jesus has its source in the Almighty God. – The authority that Jesus displays, both in his actions and in his words, is the authority of none other than God himself.

When Jesus begins teaching, the people are deeply impressed. They can see for themselves, the difference between how Jesus teaches, and how the other religious leaders and scribes teach; that when Jesus teaches, something actually happens! It is not simply a matter of impressive, articulate words doing nothing more than decorating the empty air. Unlike *all* the others, the teaching of Jesus creates a deep, and real, impression. And it does so because people can actually see the change for good it affects in the broken, and in the crippled, and in the dispossessed.

In today's Gospel, we see Jesus' teaching in action. In the first public work of his ministry there is a clash, a collision between two supreme powers, the power of God and the power of darkness. We hear that while Jesus is teaching in the synagogue, he is interrupted by the shouts of a man possessed, a man who has no authority, not even over his own body or his spirit.

The man is possessed! – He is not in charge of his own life. And yet, when Jesus speaks, he commands the oppressive, sadistic power that dominates this man's life, commanding it to leave him alone. And at Jesus' command the man is freed. The people are astonished and marvel at Jesus' teaching:

“Here is a teaching that in new and with authority behind it.”

When Jesus teaches, he shares not only his wisdom but his power. And Jesus' actions are his principal teachings. – That is his unique authority. – He uses his power to liberate people from the evil forces that dominate their lives. And when others see what he is doing with his teaching, they begin to wonder who he really is.

From the very beginning of his ministry Jesus seems to meet with genuine approval and success. One can almost hear the people's applause. But later, as we know, things will change, and the applause will fade away.

When people want to shelter from his teaching, and ignore his worth, they will distract themselves by focusing on his background, his address, his family, his supporters. His listeners will haul in the usual array of defence mechanisms to protect themselves from his insight, and they will begin to question his authority, to criticise his values, to denounce his preference.

Even so, Jesus is very much aware, that the road from approval to violence is but a short one, and that he will not be spared from facing the rejection that *all* the prophets before him had to face. All of that goes with the territory. The important point is that Jesus stays committed; committed to using his power for good. He continues to exercise his authority to liberate all those who are bound up. And he continues to confront those who callously lay burdens on the weak. – With applause, or without applause. – Regardless of any, and all, popularity opinion polls, Jesus struggles on.

If Jesus receives his authority from elsewhere, that is to say from his heavenly Father, then it is also to his Father that he looks for approval and support.

Ultimately, when all is said and done, Jesus is responsible to no one but his heavenly Father, from whom *all* power and authority come – and to him alone – to the God of ‘Almighty Power’ and ‘Divine Authority’!