

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Stephen Brown tells about a man who was sitting on a board of nails, and it was hurting. A psychologist came along and said, “Sir, the reason you are hurting is rooted in a childhood trauma. You need therapy.” A sociologist then came along, saw the hurting man, and said, “You’ve got a problem, and it is obviously the result of the kind of environment in which you grew up. Hurt is from an improper environment.” An economist next came along and said, “Money is the root of all hurt. Let me help you with your portfolio.” Then a minister came along and said, “If you learn to praise the Lord in all your circumstances, you won’t hurt so much. Your spiritual life leaves something to be desired. Start reading your Bible and praying every day, and it will get better.” Finally, a little girl came along and said, “Mister, why don’t you get off the board?” [*No More Mr. Nice Guy!* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986).] Some of us need to get off the tack. We need to get moving and get help. Today’s Gospel tells us how Jesus responded to a hurting man.

The common theme of today’s readings is Divine authority as exercised in this world by the prophets of the Old Testament in their messages, by the apostles (including St. Paul), in their writings and teaching in the New Testament, and by Jesus in his teaching and healing ministry. Today’s first reading tells us that a true prophet speaks with authority because it is God Who speaks through him. “A *prophet like me*,” is a reference to the future expected Messiah. In the second reading, St. Paul exercises his God-given authority as the *Apostle to the Gentiles* to teach people in Corinth that marriage is a holy state ordained by God and that it is a life-long partnership according to the teaching of the Lord. In the Gospel, we see the anointed messiah exercising his power and authority by teaching, practicing

what he preaches and even casting out demons and bringing total liberation and freedom.

On that Sabbath, when Jesus was teaching, the people were amazed: “What is this? A new teaching with authority. He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey Him.” That is the thing about Jesus. Jesus is different from every other teachers. He has the power, the authority, the willingness, the dedication to change human lives and bring them freedom. The word “authority” comes from the Latin “auctoritas”, which has its root word “auctor” – “author” or “creator” in English. A writer or author can look at his or her work – an essay, a short story, a novel, or a poem – and say, “This is my creation.” The government recognizes that the author has rights over his creation. When we talk about the authority of the Lord, we confess and recognize that He is the Creator, or Author of the Universe. He has the power to govern the universe. Just as an author can determine what takes place in the story he writes, God can determine what takes place in the universe He has created.

The authority of Jesus comes from himself. He possesses the fullness of authority because He is God. The unclean spirit in the Gospel knew this: “What have you to do with us Jesus of Nazareth? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!” It is very interesting to note that the evil spirit knows Jesus as God. However it continues to disobey and oppose him. Unfortunately, this is what happens among so many people nowadays. They are like the evil spirit in the Gospel. They profess belief in Jesus, for they claim to be Christians. Yet they continue to openly reject his teachings and disobey his commands. This is what Pope Benedict XVI noted: a growing “phenomenon” of people in modern society “who wish to belong to the Church but who are strongly determined by a vision of life that is opposed to the faith.”

Jesus taught with authority, not only because he is God, but also because his words are always accompanied by his deeds, and his deeds are invariably in consonance with his words. When he taught about love, for instance, he proved it by his own example: “No greater love than for a man to give his life for his friends.” And, indeed, he showed this when he willingly offered his life on the cross for us, even “while we were still enemies” because of our sins (cf. Rom 5:8). That is why he could demand from us: “A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 13:34). How far we are from the example of Jesus! Our words are reduced meaningless because too often they are not accompanied by actions. Sometimes we even act contrary to what we say and teach. Christian witnessing is what is lacking in Christians today.

In Baptism, we have become Christians – we are supposed to be like Christ. We just don’t imitate Him; we imbibe and assimilate His Spirit. As Christians, therefore, we can also teach with authority – and no need to shout. Our words will also become powerful if in and by our lives, we truly give witness to the power of Jesus – the power to serve, to love, to heal, to console, to liberate and to save. We become the living and concrete extensions and instruments of Jesus in his work of salvation.

There is a true story about this famous psychologist. He has ministered to thousands of clients especially dealing with addictions. He is known for his penetrating psychological insights. But he had a great difficulty mastering his own emotions. A "demon" which afflicted him was drinking addiction. In the beginning like anyone else he was just a social drinker. But when he became very famous, and he started travelling a lot and he was away from his family for many days. That’s when the problem started. When he had free time, he would go to the bar and would have a good time. Slowly but surely, his drinking became a habit and

habit slowly became an addiction. And he became an alcoholic, still giving guidance to many people.

Slowly he became irresponsible and abusive to his wife and children. He was feeling miserable and lonely. Eventually he became unfaithful to his wife. Now he is leading a reckless double life. He resolved several times not to drink again. But they were all empty promises.

Slowly he lost his career, his wife, children and even his own parents. Nobody can stand him anymore! One day as he was driving home after drinking he ended up having a car accident and he was taken to the hospital. As he was in the hospital, one day this Catholic priest visited him. After hearing his story, the priest, prepared him for a good confession, absolved his sins after so many years, gave him communion, anointed him with oil and welcomed him back to the church. We do not know exactly what happened to him that day, but somehow his addiction was broken. It certainly had something to do with his desire to confess his sins and seek Christ's forgiveness. And it was as if an unclean spirit had been cast out from him. He entered into some of the most productive – and happiest – years of his life.

When we see such things happen - and we do see those things almost every day, we can only marvel and react as did the townspeople of Capernaum: "What is this? A new teaching with authority. He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him." Jesus can also liberate you – and me.

Life Messages: 1) We need to approach Jesus for liberation: Jesus did not use his authority and Divine power to rule and control people. He came to make people free. Hence, let us approach Jesus with trusting Faith so that he may free us from

the evil spirits that keep us from praying and that prevent us from loving others and sharing our blessings with others. Jesus also frees us from all the “evil spirits” of fear, jealousy, envy, addictions, compulsions, selfishness, anger, resentment and hostility. May he free us from all those spirits which make us deaf, dumb, blind, lame and paralyzed, physically and spiritually. 2) We need to use our God-given authority to build up lives. So many people with authority have made a lasting impression on our lives either for good or bad. Perhaps it was a grandparent, an uncle, or a parent, who loved us and cared for us. Perhaps it was a Sunday school teacher who encouraged us in our Faith and exerted a positive impact on our lives. Perhaps we remember the kindness as well as the firm discipline that a schoolteacher gave us. Teachers are powerful because they change and mould lives. Hence, let us all become good teachers like Jesus and use our authority to mould young lives in the right way.