



# Fr. Samuel's Homily

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time

January 28, 2018

The readings for today present us with two significant challenges. The first is expressed in the Psalm refrain that we just sang together, “If today you hear God’s voice harden not your hearts.” The second is implicit in the scene from the Gospel in which Jesus expels from a man an unclean spirit. The challenge to us there is to be willing to believe that good has power over evil. Indeed the challenge is to be willing to accept a basic teaching of our faith: that evil only has the power that we give to it. And we give evil power primarily by allowing it to keep us in fear.

Let us take a closer look at this scene from the Gospel. It is from the first chapter of Mark. It is his account of the very beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. In previous verses he has made an announcement and issued a command. The announcement is that the time of fulfillment is at hand. The command is “repent and believe in the Gospel.” Then he moves on to the encounter with the man with the unclean spirit. Here he is about to make a demonstration of the meaning of his announcement and the power of his command.

Keep in mind that people of the ancient world held strong beliefs in spirits. They believed that all the evil that existed came about through unclean spirits getting into and influencing the minds and actions of human beings. The man that Jesus encountered was controlled by the voices of evil. That is not unlike the reality that we face in modern times. There are many voices out there seeking to influence our thoughts and actions. Some of those are good. However, from the things we see happening in this world, some of them are clearly evil. The problem that we face is the same one that human beings have always faced. Often, through various means—our fear, selfishness and greed preeminent among them—they tempt us to allow them into us.

In any case, Jesus confronts those forces in the man that He encountered. Jesus has within Him only the power of who He is. In him is the power of goodness and love. In the face of that the evil voices within that man—the unclean spirit—have no power at all. They are forced to flee. What remains is the man as he truly is—a man beloved of God and in this world to be a bearer of God’s love for others, just as are all of us.

Those who witness this scene are confused. They mutter, “What is this? A new teaching with authority? Not like the scribes.” What did they mean by that?

Well, part of the answer to that question lies in the word that Mark used for “authority.” The word that he used in Greek was ‘exousia’. It does connote authority but there is also in that word a connotation of special power. Hence, it was not the like the authority of the scribes. The scribes held power, but it was merely social and religious power. In driving out unclean spirits Jesus demonstrated that His power, the power of the Gospel, was something far greater than that. It was nothing less than an announcement of the coming of God in power to rescue God’s people. It was an affirmation that God is among us, and through us being willing to have faith and trust in his power, evil cannot prevail over us.

The man with the unclean spirit heard the voice of Jesus. In his encounter his heart was opened and he moved beyond the voices of evil that kept him bound. But why did he trust in what Jesus had to offer? Well, as is true with all of us, on some level, no matter how much we might give into temptations and the evil of this world, he still had some sense of who he really was. He had some connection with the innocence in which God created him. He had some sense that he was far more than what he had become because of the forces that were influencing him. He knew that they spoke to the worst in him—to the things of his fears. Jesus however spoke to the best within him—the foundations of all of his hopes for what life can really be.

That is how we can know, of all of the voices that come to us in our lives, what is the voice of God. God never guides us into acting out of our fears, our selfishness or our greed. God’s voice never calls us to divisions or hatreds. God’s voice never reinforces the so many negative things that we learn as we grow up in a fallen world. What God’s voice does speak to is the very best within us—the essential goodness that lies at the very center of every human heart. And when we hear His voice that deeply within us, we know that it is He and we can then open our hearts to His voice and to the love that He offers. And then we can live in this world in a different kind of way. That is what Jesus meant when He said, “The time of fulfillment is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel.”

In the end, then, there is no greater weapon against the evil of this world than the power of love. That was the new teaching that Jesus gave to us in confronting the man with the unclean spirit. In that He shows us that the power of the Kingdom of God is achieved in the creation of a new human family made up of everyone who lives in accord with God’s will—living the gospel of unity and peace though hearts not hardened by our fears but open to the power of faith and of hope.