

The Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time January 31, 2021

There is no doubt that Jesus made a profound impression on everyone He met. No one who came in contact with Him was ever the same afterward. Throughout the gospels, we hear that people MARVELED at His words, were AMAZED by His miracles, and were ASTONISHED at how He acted.

Today's gospel is no exception. St Mark tells us that as Jesus was teaching in the synagogue, the people were astonished as they listened. They were riveted by His words because, unlike anyone they had ever heard before, He spoke with authority. Not only was He interesting to listen to, but His words penetrated their hearts and illuminated their minds. No one had ever spoken to them with such conviction and meaning.

And their astonishment would only grow, because not only did Jesus demonstrate His authority by the words He spoke, He also showed his power by the actions He performed. In today's gospel, a man possessed by a demon was sent into a fit of convulsion when Jesus spoke. The demon knew very well who Jesus was, the Holy One of God. Jesus rebuked the demon and it came out of the man with a loud cry. The scene must have left everyone in the synagogue shaken and confused. I think we can say with confidence that the people had never seen anything like that before! The authority of Jesus' words was backed up by the power of his actions.

None of us will ever have the opportunity to meet Jesus face to face in this life. That does not mean, however, that we can no longer be astonished by His words or by His works. Jesus is still among us exercising his authority in a powerful way through the Church in the power of the Holy Spirit. He continues to speak to us with authority through the Bible, and his power over sin and evil is powerfully present in the Sacraments.

Let us take a look at how each of us can meet Jesus and be transformed by hearing God's word and receiving the Sacraments.

First, Jesus continues to speak with authority to the world through the Bible. As Christians, we believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. Though it was written by men in the language and imagery of their time, it was inspired by the Holy Spirit to such a degree that we can truly say that God Himself is its author. In the Bible, we experience the authority of God's Word teaching us the truth about His love and calling our hearts to change. By reading and studying the Bible, we come to understand God in a way that we otherwise wouldn't be unable to. Because it is the inspired word of God, whenever we read it privately at home or hear it proclaimed at Mass, it is Jesus Himself we are hearing. And so, any of us who have ever wished that we could hear Jesus

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Speak to us should read and study the Bible.

There was a man once who decided to read the Bible from cover to cover. He came across many sections that he couldn't understand, but he kept on going. He simply thanked God for the parts that he could make sense of and asked for help understanding the more difficult sections. That is the way we have to approach the Bible. It is not always easy to read and understand. Rather than be overwhelmed by it, we should start slowly by maybe focusing on the Sunday readings or the daily Mass readings. There are also many Catholic sources to help guide our study of Scripture. Whatever way we may decide to approach it, the Word of God is indispensable in the spiritual life of all believers.

Second, we encounter Jesus' continuing authority over sin and evil through the Sacraments. Each Sacrament is a real encounter with Jesus. While we meet Jesus in the Bible through words, we encounter Him in the Sacraments through signs. These signs are not just symbols of Jesus' presence and action. Rather, they really give us the grace that they signify. For instance, the waters of baptism really grant the forgiveness of sin and make us children of God. Through the Sacrament of Confession, we really receive the forgiveness of our sins. And in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, bread and wine really become the Body and Blood of Christ. It is not symbols that we receive when we come up to communion, but the body, blood, soul and divinity of the Risen Jesus himself. When we take to heart the mystery of Christ's presence and action in all the Sacraments, how could we not want to receive them as frequently as possible to be transformed by the power of our Savior?

The Sacraments, however, are not magic. For us to have our lives changed by the light and power that the Sacraments offer us, we must strive to live lives that are pleasing to God. We saw in the gospel reading today how the demon shouted out when Jesus taught in the synagogue. That is because Jesus and the Devil cannot be in the same place together. They are enemies of each other. Just so, we cannot welcome Jesus into our lives and continue to hold grudges, gossip, lie or steal. There can be no compromise with sin if Jesus is to have a place in our hearts. It is certainly not easy, and we can never be totally free of sin in this life, but the Sacraments are given to us precisely for this reason - to give us both the desire and strength to change and to become examples of Jesus' love to everyone we meet.

None of us can hope to meet Jesus face to face in this life. But, we still can marvel at the words He speaks in the Bible and be astonished by the mercy He shows us in the sacraments.

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Each of us will one day stand before his throne of glory to give an account of our lives. At that time, we will see Him face to face. If we take to heart the Word proclaimed to us today and receive Him frequently in the Sacraments with faith, we can trust that we will be ready to receive His mercy and forgiveness when He reveals Himself to us in all His glory.