

## Homily for the Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time 2009 (Year B)

In the narrative of St. Mark's gospel, this is the first story of Jesus teaching. He has been baptised, he has proclaimed that the kingdom of God is close, and he has chosen his twelve companions, but this is the first time that we see what happens when people hear in detail what he has to say. They are bowled over by the experience of listening to him, and Mark says that this is because, unlike the scribes, he teaches them with authority. This word authority appears again later in the reading; the people recognise that there is something new here, and its newness lies in the fact that there is an unusual level of authority. The news spreads like wildfire. But what do they mean when they say he teaches with authority? This is important for us, because all around us people claim to speak with authority about all sorts of issues; we have to decide whether they are worth listening to or not. Can this gospel story help us out?

This question is made rather more complex by the fact that social scientists have argued for years about what authority means, and about what different sorts of authority exist. This is not the place to get too tied up in all that, but one might simplify the issue of authority to the question: should I listen to, and act on, what this person says?

Clearly, if a policeman stands in the road in front of me and holds up his hand for me to stop, I should listen and act. But what if a policeman tells me what I am or am not allowed to say? Or if he tells me who I should, or should not vote for? What about political and religious leaders - should I listen and act on everything they say? How far does their authority extend? Then, of course, there are the charismatic personalities, the people with the gift of persuasion, with the techniques of oratory that enable them to have a crowd eating out of their hand. What is their authority? To what extent should I listen and act when they speak?

Let us return to our story. Jesus has made no claims for himself, no claim about who he is. The Father has spoken at his baptism, and the unclean spirit speaks in today's story, but really there is no reason for the people who hear him in the synagogue to have any idea of who he is. Yet they are amazed at his teaching, and at the authority with which it is delivered. There is something about him that makes them think, we should listen and act. This can only be what is sometimes called his charismatic authority, the force of his personality and the genuineness of what he says.. Such a charismatic appeal is a dangerous thing, and in fact Jesus shies away from it. Again and again he tells people who he has healed to keep quiet about it; after the miracle of the loaves and fishes, he sees that the people want to make him king, and he slips away to the hills alone. He insists that his authority is not his own, but comes from the Father: 'I do nothing of my own accord, what I say is what the Father has taught me' (John 8.28). Of course, he is right to point people away from the force of his personality alone and ask them to judge what he says and what he does by his fidelity to the Father. History is littered with charismatic men who have led revolutions and cults, only to be corrupted by power and adulation so that they end up as self-indulgent and as oppressive as everything they once set out to replace. Jesus wants the people to see, right from the beginning, that he is not like these people.

The gospels give us two tests by which to judge those who want to exercise authority over us. The first becomes clear from the passage we heard today. The people pick up

the fact that with Jesus, what you see is what you get: with him, more than with anyone else, you know that if he says people should act in this way, or that way, he will always act in those ways himself, without fail. When he says 'If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself, take up his cross and follow me' (Mk 8.34) we can be absolutely sure that he is only asking people to do exactly what he will do. This is a rare gift in leaders. In fact, because we are sinful human beings, attached to all sorts of things that we ought really to be more willing to let go, every leader proves imperfect in this regard. But we have a right to scrutinise the lives of those who lead us in this light, just as Jesus said of the Pharisees: 'You must do and observe what they tell you, but do not be guided by what they do, since they do not practise what they preach' (Mt 23.3). Is there a consistency between what this man says, and what he does? This is why there are such rows in the United States over politicians who support abortion. It is not just a single issue on which they happen to be at odds with the Church, it tells us something about their whole approach to life. It tells us that this is a person who believes it is acceptable to say that some human beings don't count, and this undermines everything else they say about human dignity. Once you accept that it is acceptable to say some human beings don't count, you cannot complain if other people say the same. If you say that you think unborn human beings don't count you cannot complain if someone else says that women don't count, or black people don't count, or Muslims don't count, or Catholics don't count, or whatever. This is such an important issue not just because it is important in itself, but because it calls into question the integrity of someone who claims to uphold the dignity and rights of some human beings, while denying those of others.

So one test of those who claim to exercise authority is, do we see an internal consistency between what they say and what they do? Another is provided by that quotation I mentioned earlier: 'I do nothing of my own accord, what I say is what the Father has taught me' (John 8.28). Of course, any crackpot can claim that God has told him to do something, but the question is does what this person says, whether they are a religious leader or a political one, stand in continuity with our tradition. Someone who has power, even legitimate democratic power, does not therefore have the authority to do as they please. One of the beauties of our Catholic tradition is that it gives us a vision of the whole of human existence, and so it is possible to find within the tradition ancient wisdom that helps us to resolve, if sometimes slowly and painfully, the problems and issues of today. So, we can judge every claim and every action by the question, does this accord with our glorious Catholic vision of what human life is all about, does it promote authentic human flourishing? Where a human law fails to promote the common good by means of freedom and responsibility it becomes an unjust law, and as St. Thomas Aquinas says it 'thus has not so much the nature of law as of a kind of violence' (quoted in CCC 1902).

There are always plenty of people claiming our allegiance, claiming to speak with authority. Often they are well marketed, and they deliver their message in a way that is convincing. We must take responsibility for testing carefully what they say.