

Homily 2021.01.31 Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

To begin, I will briefly address the second reading. Paul is not against marriage. Paul's concern is that all should give their undivided attention to the Lord. Remember that when Paul wrote this he expected the Lord's return very soon. There was, therefore, only one priority: the Lord and his imminent return. Nothing else mattered. The Day of the Lord was expected before that generation had passed away.

The church teaches that marriage is a Sacrament. This means that attending to your marriage can be the Lord's work and can be 'full of grace'. It doesn't necessarily mean a heart divided between the Lord and one's Spouse. The Lord is present in the marriage, whether recognised or not. Christian couples who truly manifest this presence in their morality and spirituality are a powerful witness to the world.

The theme linking the first reading and the Gospel is 'authority'. In the first reading from Deuteronomy, Moses promised the people a prophet like himself who will come after him and speak the words of God to them. Jesus is this 'new Moses'. He speaks with authority and the people recognise it. He's not a Scribe, repeating well-worn commentaries on the Law. He speaks from within, from a depth that the people cannot yet know, but can sense is there.

The first casting out of an unclean spirit serves as a demonstration of Jesus' authority, and the power which lies behind it.

How we interpret 'unclean spirit' today is a matter of much sensitivity and much controversy. On one extreme, there are those who would say that all disturbances of mind and spirit require some sort of 'casting out'. On the other extreme, there are those who would say that such disturbances are purely psychological and have nothing to do with the spiritual realm at all. Neither position will do, it seems.

At a moment when mental health is fragile for many, we need to tread carefully on this sensitive ground, but do so with firm heart and resolve. Some are grappling with depression for the first time in their lives; they may not know how to handle it or even how to name it. This is a moment of spiritual vulnerability. On a number of occasions I have administered the Sacrament of Holy Anointing in such cases as it seemed that only Grace could touch them. The modern approach to such matters is multi-disciplinary: fresh air, exercise, diet, mindfulness, relationships, therapies, medications and so on. Spirituality and Grace must be part of that mix.

At times we all need a word of authority from the Lord. It's a short sharp command: "Be quiet! Come out of him!" Keep this by you for when it's needed. When it's all too much, or you can't be bothered to eat or exercise, or you feel no good and worthless, or oppressed in any way by such subtle lies or temptations, then be gentle with yourself, but firm with that which assails you, and with the Lord's authority tell it to "Be quiet! Leave!"

I repeat. Be gentle with yourself. Be firm with that which assails you. Command with the Lord's authority: "Be quiet! Leave!"