

January 31, 2021

11:30 a.m.

St. Augustine Cathedral

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

As we celebrate this Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, we're already completing the first month of the year. Besides that, we've passed the half-way point of Winter; Daylight is coming earlier each day, and Sunset is taking place later; and, other than the snowfall we're currently getting, in many ways so far, this has been a pretty mild winter. We can all consult various expert sources about what the 2nd half of Winter will be like, and whether we can expect an "early Spring". I asked Alexa this morning, and the answer there was only that Winter would end in 47 days, on the 20th of March. We can also consult the Farmer's Almanac (which by the way predicted a "mild" winter), or AccuWeather's long-range forecast. But of course on Tuesday of this week, one of the most renowned of all experts of all-time will give the definitive answer as to how much longer this Winter will last. Yes, "Punxsutawney Phil", the great weather "prognosticator Groundhog" from eastern Pennsylvania, who for 134 years has been predicting how long Winter will last, based on whether or not he sees his shadow, will give us the answer we're all dying to know.

Of course, we all realize that "Groundhog Day" is just a mid-winter distraction that has become a great tradition, and that "Punxsutawney Phil" is really not an "expert", we do know that our world is greatly blessed to have any number of "experts"---people who are well-informed and are acknowledged "authorities" on various important subjects---whom we can consult for opinions on all the burning questions of the day.

In today's Gospel, St. Mark tells us that "*Jesus came to Capernaum and, on the Sabbath, entered the Synagogue and taught.*" That in itself was not so unusual; anyone was entitled to offer an insight into the Reading from Scripture that was being proclaimed. What was unusual was that normally when the "Scribes" taught, they were simply repeating the teaching of the Old Law. But, there was something impressive about the way Jesus was teaching. St. Mark tells us that "*the people were astonished because Jesus taught them as One having authority, and not as the Scribes.*"

But not only was it what Jesus taught that was impressive. St. Mark also tells us that immediately after that, *a man with an unclean spirit*----someone who was possessed by some evil demon---asked Jesus: "*Have you come to destroy us?*"

And then the “evil spirits” identified Jesus for Who He really was: *“I know Who you are: Jesus of Nazareth;---the ‘Holy One of God’.”* What Jesus did next further astounded the people. St. Mark tells us: *“Jesus rebuked the man, and said (to the evil spirit): ‘Quiet! Come out of him’.”* The man was convulsed as the evil spirit came out of him, and left him limp, but free. The people exclaimed: *“What is this? A new teaching with authority!”*

So, what is an authority? If we go back to the origin of that word, which is “author”, we find the meaning is “life-giver”. So, an “authority” ----an “expert” ---- is one who gives life, or enlightens our understanding.

As you may know, today we begin “Catholic Schools Week”. We take great pride in all 21 of our Catholic Grade and High Schools, and during this week, we express our deep gratitude to all involved in making our Schools so special: our sponsoring parishes, our Catholic School parents/families, our generous benefactors, and of course our Students. But most of all, we commend our dedicated and faith-filled Teachers, who truly give our students the “new life” of learning, and provide a lived example of faith. Our Catholic Schools not only offer an excellent and quality education, but also provide the best way we know to teach the Faith to our young children, teenagers and young adults. During this week in particular, we salute all those who are a part of our Catholic School community, and we remain committed to strengthening them now and for future generations.

In addition to our Catholic School Teachers, we also commend Teachers in all schools and universities throughout our country. Teachers are integral in the formation and education of our young people, the next generation of leaders in our society and in our Church. And we pray that the setbacks that have taken place in our entire educational system due to this worldwide pandemic will soon be able to be repaired, and all students and teachers can move forward in the essential quest of education.

In addition to Teachers, we also look to many other “experts” and “those who speak with authority” in every aspect of our lives. Over these last 9 months or so, we’ve been looking to those especially in the Health Care professions to help us have the correct information about the novel COVID-19, and to the scientists and researchers in our Pharmaceutical companies for the development of life-saving vaccines to counter this awful virus, as well as to government officials and political leaders as those who should be the “experts” in helping to protect us.

We definitely have a host of “experts” offering opinions on a variety of significant challenges facing us in our world; the problem is that many of those “experts” are offering conflicting opinions, which leaves us in a quandary as to whose opinion to follow.

So, as we think again about today’s Gospel, what was different about the way Jesus taught and acted that “*astonished*” and “*amazed*” the people, and made it clear that Jesus had brought “*a new teaching with authority*”? What made the difference is that Jesus knew what He was talking about; He was able to explain God’s Word in a way that was understandable to the people. But in addition, His “authority” was also obvious from what He did---His ability to command “an evil spirit” to relinquish its hold on that poor person; Jesus believed what He taught--- He practiced what He preached. Jesus not only knew about “evil spirits”; He “had authority” over them. Jesus not only knew about “God’s Love”; He also lived a life of Love. He not only taught people about “God’s Mercy” and our need to offer forgiveness; He also practiced forgiveness, and would do so with His dying words on the Cross when He pleaded to His Father: “*Forgive them, for they know not what they do.*” He not only taught about the need to reach out to the poor and care for their needs; Jesus sought out the poor, and ate with sinners, and washed the feet of His Apostles, and defined what it means to be “great” as the One who serves the needs of all.

The fact that Jesus didn’t say one thing, but then do another, was the single-most impressive aspect of what attracted others to follow Him---because He believed what He taught; He practiced what He preached. Perhaps that should be the criteria that we follow as well when it comes to which experts’ actions we follow, or “voices speaking with authority” we heed.

There is one ultimate “Voice of Authority”, and that, my dear Family of Faith, always has been, and remains, the Voice of God! There is one ultimate Truth, and that is the Good News that Jesus came into the world to teach and to be. But we also know that there is an Opponent to the Voice of God and the Good News of Truth. As Jesus came to proclaim the Kingdom of God, we also know that, since the beginning of Time, the Evil One has committed himself to oppose that Kingdom at every turn. So with Jesus’ very first teaching in the Synagogue as we heard today, the “evil spirits” possessing that poor person whom Jesus liberated, not only identified Jesus for Who He really is---“the Holy One of God”, but also revealed Jesus’ ultimate mission: for Jesus to destroy the power of the Evil One. Jesus accomplished that mission and guaranteed that the Devil will

never have the ultimate victory, when He destroyed the power of sin and death through His suffering, death and resurrection; but, that doesn't mean that the Devil doesn't continue the battle. He does so by filling our world with all kinds of ways to distract us, to tempt us, to deceive us, to divide us, and to try to lead us away from Jesus and the Truth.

That remains the ultimate question for all of us---to which Voice will we listen? Who do we let speak to our hearts with "authority"? Who, or what, "amazes" and "astounds" us? For those of us who come together here on a regular basis---in person or virtually---- to listen to God's Word and to be nourished with the Spiritual Food of the Eucharist----what difference does that make in your life?

All the other Readings that we've heard today remind us of that ultimate choice that we need to make. In today's First Reading, Moses told the people that *"a Prophet like me will the Lord, your God, raise up for you from among your own kin---to Him shall you listen."* That prophecy was fulfilled many generations later when Jesus---the Word made Flesh---entered our world to be God with us. As Moses told us: it is to Him that we must listen. St. Paul told the people of Corinth, and us, the same thing in our Second Reading. Whether we are married, unmarried; men or women; laypeople or ordained----St. Paul urges us to *"be free of anxieties"* so that we can *"adhere to the Lord without distractions."*

Each and every week, when we listen to God's Word, what difference does that make in your life? Do you allow God's Word to "amaze" you, to "astound" you?; or do the many other "voices" that so loudly speak in our world drown out the Voice of God?

Our society is deeply divided because of all kinds of "voices" that are offering their opinions as "experts" and trying to convince us that they "speak with authority". However, my dear sisters and brothers in Christ, there is only One Voice that speaks in the way that makes the ultimate difference---the difference between life and death. That is the Voice of God, spoken by Jesus---the Word made Flesh---and taught with His authority by the Church.

Today's Readings truly speak to us with the "authority" of God Himself. Because of that, let us "listen" to the Prophet of God Who is God's Son, as Moses directed us to do; let us follow St. Paul's advice and *"be free of the anxieties...that distract"* us from God's Voice. And as we prayed in today's beautiful Psalm Refrain: *"If today you hear His Voice, harden not your hearts."* Most importantly

of all, let us open our hearts to be both amazed and astounded by Jesus' teaching and actions, for He not only speaks the Truth with "authority"----He IS the Truth; He not only "enlightens" our minds, but He leads us into Eternal Life forever.

Let us proclaim by the actions of our lives, by the Voices that we pay attention to; by what "amazes" and "astounds" us----that we know far better than the "evil spirits" Who Jesus is as we proclaim: *"I know Who you are----Jesus of Nazareth, the Holy One of God!"*

God bless you, now and always!