4th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B 2012 (read only)

Every so often I hear or read a few spoken or written words that seem to encapsulate my own perspective or beliefs. Wherever it comes from, be it in conversation, listening to a radio programme or reading a book or a poem; it’s as if someone else knows exactly how I see something. Such moments both inspire and frustrate me. They inspire me because they confirm and renew my own deepest convictions and motivations; they frustrate me because I have to confess being a bit jealous that someone else has got there first; and in such beautiful or pithy language.

It’s worth pondering this in the light of today’s gospel. Those who are present when Jesus teaches and casts out demons express both admiration and consternation when they say ‘here is a teaching that is new and with authority behind it’.

It’s as if what they hear strikes a chord with their own inner compass, it resonates even though it challenges their previous conventions. They realise he is teaching something new, something their own religious traditions and authorities have so far failed to understand or express. They also realise that Jesus has an authority unlike any they have experienced before.

This begs the question “in what way is the authority of Jesus new?” How does it differ from the way their own leaders and teachers exercised their role?

In recent times I have been drawing a distinction between POWER and AUTHORITY.

For me power describes how people with any level of responsibility can misuse their positions for their own advantage, putting personal status, wealth and security above the common good. Power manipulates people and situations and does violence to truth, integrity and justice. Powerful people bully, cajole and manipulate. This is the kind of power rejected by Jesus during the temptation in the desert and as he stood before Pilate.

Authority is something quite different. Authority respects and upholds the truth. Truths such as the truth that creation is good, that we are made in God’s image (even though we fail to live up to this vocation). Authority also respects and upholds justice. Justice brings to light all the abuses of power which have littered the exercise of responsibility be it political, religious, economic or within families.

The tension between power and authority is a perennial one both within society and inside our own hearts. Living an honest, productive and loving life is never an easy thing. Like the man possessed by demons we need help to liberate ourselves from the inclinations and attitudes that draw us away from truth and justice.

Thankfully, like those who witnessed the ministry of Jesus first hand, we too have a conscience as well as free will. We also have, in Jesus, the one who constantly invites us to face our demons so that we can embrace the life of real freedom we all yearn for.

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