

A New and Authoritative Teaching
Reflection on the Gospel-4th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 1:21-28)

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Today's gospel reading recounts the first episode in a section of Mark's gospel that focusses on a typical day in the ministry of Jesus as authoritative teacher and prophetic healer (1:21-38). Jesus comes with his disciples to Capernaum. On the Sabbath day, Judaism's holy day, he goes into the synagogue, Judaism's local gathering place, and preaches. The verbal forms in the first sentence indicate that teaching in the synagogue was part of his customary activity. Jesus is thus located firmly within Israel's prophetic tradition of proclaiming God's word to the people.

In today's first reading from Deuteronomy (18:15-20), the term "prophet" appears eight times. Moses tells the people that God will respond to their request at Sinai (Horeb) and raise up from among them a prophet like himself, a mediator between God and the people, one who will speak God's word. Prophets do not appoint or authorise themselves: God calls and authorises the prophets to speak the word of God. Failure to heed the prophets carries its own consequences as does the attempt to assume a prophetic role without God's authorisation. Just as the prophets of old speak the authentic word of God only when they are authorised by the God of Israel, so Jesus of Nazareth, later to identify himself in this gospel as God's prophet (6:4), speaks and acts "with authority". In other words, he speaks with the authority of the God of Israel.

In this first Markan story of his divinely authorised activity, Jesus is approached by a man "with an unclean spirit". The man's loud scream sets up a confrontation between the power of God mediated through Jesus and the forces of destruction that often take hold of human lives. Jesus silences and expels these destructive forces and thus renders a seriously troubled person whole. In the ancient world, such forces were often personified as demonic beings. Confounding such "unclean spirit(s)" or demonic forces brought social and communal benefits to the troubled person as well as physical and emotional healing.

God's reign or empire is made real through a healing action that is perceived as "a new teaching". In this instance, Jesus' words, "Be quiet! Come out of him!" effect the cure of a deeply troubled person. For Jesus and his disciples, as for us, congruence between words and actions is integral to authentic gospel proclamation. While words have their place, we teach primarily by who we are and what we do.

Jesus is demonstrating to his newly formed group of followers that the gospel they are to proclaim is grounded in the ordinary struggles of ordinary people. This gospel carries the power to lift the burdens and restore the troubled of our world to wholeness and health. We may wish to acknowledge the "unclean spirits" that take hold of us from time to time and thus open ourselves to the power of God mediated through God's healer-teachers in our time.