

Homily for 4th Sunday of Ordinary Time 2018

The local nightly news appears to me to take on a predictable form. A stabbing in Sydney, a road rage in Brisbane, a drug bust in Melbourne, and sundry political goings on in Washington. Little mention of human tragedies unfolding in parts of Africa and the middle east. Maybe, the local and immediate is all we can handle as there is so much information around. In defence we retreat into ourselves. For all the progress over the past generation the plight of the world does not seem to improve. The same disasters and conflict repeat themselves again and again. And we don't wait for any Messiahs to come and save us. We only look for an immediate cure for our sickness and punishment for criminals. It seems like the world and the Church takes three steps forward and two steps back.

As we hear the Bible read we are aware that the same story is being told. The Hebrew scriptures tell of a people who take a few steps forward in their covenant with God only to renege and revert to their old ways. The bible tells of the ordinary, petty, lives of kings and paupers with all the gory detail. They, however, did wait for a Messiah. Their reflection convinced them that left to their own devices they could not remedy the situation. Only God could do it.

In the fullness of time Jesus of Nazareth came whom the early Christian Church appropriated as that prophet like Moses anticipated in the first reading today. And Jesus came teaching with authority, unlike the Scribes, we are told. The Scribes taught well. They knew their stuff, the Law of Moses. They saw it their task to ensure the people observed it. Seemingly, we are told, they did not have the same authority that Jesus displayed.

We all know when we hear a good teacher. It is the kind of thing that when hearing a person share an insight we say, ah ha, that is what I think also but could never put it into words. In other words the truth the speaker tells finds an echo in our own hearts. Not just in our minds but in our very soul. A truth that was always there is brought to consciousness in us. So we recognise a good teacher. Truth is like that it must be received not just imposed. Imposing external authority over people is the easiest way. But unfortunately it does not always change human nature. It just means ever more efforts to police behaviour and our prison populations explode.

Apparently, Jesus hearers heard him as one with a different kind of authority. The people were not particularly amazed at his miracles. There were plenty of miracle workers around. He downplayed them telling people not to speak openly about them. They were most impressed by his teaching with authority. Frustratingly for us, the Gospels don't often tell us what that teaching was. But what he taught is demonstrated by his healing of the man possessed by the unclean spirit. It was a demonstration of God reigning in our very midst. His teaching is not simply a lot of new ideas requiring our adherence, imposed from above. It is about a transformation within us that gives us new eyes to see clearly to deal with the evil in the world. The Gospel message is that God can transform us even from things beyond our control. Without that transformation we can easily substitute the written text of the bible for the real inner experience of God. That is the way of the fundamentalist. And as St Paul says the letter alone brings death, but the Spirit gives life.

There is a fundamental humility involved. For all our gifts and achievements we need to be prepared to embrace a poverty of spirit so we might welcome that reign of God. Jesus was confronted by an unclean spirit in a man. Whatever is meant by an unclean spirit, it was certainly something that the people were helpless to do anything about. Our world is possessed by unclean spirits of all kinds. They seem beyond our control. But together in the Body of Christ they have no power over us. This story of the man possessed comes just after Jesus had called his first disciples. He is calling us into a new family of God. In that family he declares "do not be afraid."

It is the reign of God which has come to birth in Christ. It needs also to come to birth in us. This gives us every confidence. We may be living in a time of two steps back but by God's grace we will take three more steps forward to the future of us all.

Fr Graham