

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

It is not without importance that this is the first public appearance of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. Over the next few weeks we will witness the popular acceptance of Jesus as he battles with a force that takes various forms—physical sickness, opposition from entrenched mindsets, the accusation of collusion with the enemy itself. This is the “gospel”, the good news that Jesus invites the people to accept readily by changing their lives.

The same “gospel” is offered to us for we are dealing with a power that can change our lives, not merely a set of nice, pious sayings. Too often we reduce the gospels to that and so remain relatively unmoved by the dynamic challenge they contain.

As we know, in that society possession by “unclean spirits” was a general term that covered all kinds of conditions for which we today have medical or social explanations and sophisticated labels. We can therefore approach these stories with a type of superiority as if they either don’t occur anymore or are best left to experts to deal with. Yet isn’t it true that all of us are “possessed” in different ways by forces over which we have to admit to having little or no control? Some people are enslaved by addictions to drugs, alcohol, food, gambling, and so on. Many of us suffer from more subtle addictions so that we don’t even want to admit to ourselves, let alone to anyone else, that we are virtually powerless to control them. All of us know deep down that many of our habits and ways of dealing with others are so much a part of our make up that we can do little to change them.

The people who acclaimed Jesus realized that he had something special that could influence them to change their lives. The authority and healing power of Jesus is present today in his body, the Church, through the Sacraments, but also in the love, care, and compassion of every community of faith. We only have to look around us when we are gathered for the Eucharist to name it and accept it. It is when the Church is able to back up teaching and doctrine with the same concern for the troubled lives of ordinary people that it is most effective in continuing the mission of Jesus. That is why in the Gospels he is always accompanied by followers learning how to be genuine “fishers of men.”

--Fr. Eric T. Carpine, ofm