

## From The Pastor

‘He taught them as one with authority and not as the scribes’. Authority is a many layered word and evokes different images or emotions depending on who is hearing the word. At times, the word authority will inspire a sense of security and rightness; a sense that one is standing on solid ground. At other times, authority evokes fear or the unwanted command of obedience.

What does it mean in our context today? Beginning with the authority of God’s word in the first reading, the people are relieved that they do not have to face God directly. When the people first experienced the presence of God at Mt. Horeb, they were terrified. They begged Moses to have them not experience God directly again. Moses was to be the mediator between God and the people, conveying to them all that God had decreed.

The question is one of authority and how one feels in the presence of God. The word ‘fear’ is used regularly throughout scripture. More than half the time, given the context of how the word is used, the word fear means ‘to revere’. To fear the Lord is to reverence God and the divine authority that is God’s alone. In today’s reading, it is clear that there is less reverence and more fear, in the sense of fright. The experience of God’s presence was too much for the people. His authority and might caused great fear. True faith is not based in fear, but in trust. The people ask for a mediator, and God agrees. After Moses departs, another prophet will take his place to speak to the people the word of the Lord. Through the prophets, the people could come to a stance of faith and trust in the Lord their God free from fear; a faith built on obedience out of reverence, and not frightful adherence.

The authority referred too in the gospel has a different flavor. Jesus speaks with the authority of truth because he is Truth. There is a clarity about Jesus that the people are not accustomed to. Jesus does not speak about the authority of law or rules, which is the custom of the scribes in the synagogue. Jesus speaks from the inner authority of his person grounded in love that reveals truth. The scribes say one thing, but they do another. Jesus is the same on the inside as he is on the outside; what he says and how he acts is the same. He is a man who is true and undivided.

The authority of truth in Jesus is too much for the ‘unclean spirit’ to handle. Too much truth evokes a reaction. Does the spirit cry out in defense of itself, or is this spirit trying to gain power over Jesus? Why is the spirit identified as unclean?

This man is trapped between truth and false religion. So trapped in the fear of being ‘unclean’ this person has lost control of himself to an unclean spirit. He is separated from his inner truth as a creation of God, and trapped in the excessive authority of religious law and rules. He believes himself to be completely unclean before God, thus rejected by God and a threat to all who wish to be acceptable to God. Believing this of himself, he seems to threaten Jesus. I know who you are, the holy One of God, he says. As a holy One of God, you surely will not want to come in contact with someone as unclean as me. (So get lost and leave us alone). Have you come to destroy us?

Yes, Jesus has come to destroy the lie and deception that we are unclean and unacceptable before God. Under the influence of this spirit, the man fully believes he is totally outside of God, fully rejected by Him. In fact, this is a lie. However sinful he may be, or however unfaithful he has been against keeping religious rules and laws, the truth is, he is beloved to God.

Jesus sees through the lie, delivers the man, and frees him to accept his truth as a person of God. The fact that the spirit leaves the man shocks everyone. This has not been done before in this way. Now, the people are confronted with the authority of truth that stands before them. They are now challenged to live beyond the confines of law and rules and come to know God from the truth of their hearts in faith.

The truth and authority of Jesus is ours when we stand in the security of our faith in him. Secure in a relationship of faith, not based on fear, we too have the authority to ‘cast out’ the lies and deception that ploy against our trust in God. In the face of truth, which is faith in Jesus, the lies and deceptions of the evil one do not stand a chance. Know who you are in Christ. Stand firm in faith without fear.

This week Tuesday, I will be in the hospital to receive a Pacemaker. This is a simple surgery that will implant the pacer and its wires into my heart to stabilize my heart rhythms. For many years, I have had a slow heart rate (runs in the family). This progressive condition, electrical conduction disorder, eventually needs attention. I am at that point. The Pacemaker will stabilize my condition and allow me, after a short recovery, to resume full activity. I will be resting through next weekend, with the hope of returning for mass the week of Feb. 9. Thank you for your prayers.

Father John Esper