

THE EMMAUS SERIES

4th Sunday Year B

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

1 Corinthians 7:32-35

Mark 1:21-29

Unlike the scribes, he taught with authority

The gospel reading of last Sunday showed us Mark's skill as a narrator – capturing so much with a few words. He shows this same skill in today's continuation of his gospel's introductory passage. As Jesus spends the Sabbath with the disciples he has invited to join him, the events of the day point to significant characteristics of the ministry Jesus is to undertake.

Capernaum, the hometown of Simon Peter, was to become the headquarters of this Galilean ministry. That Jesus regularly took part in the worship of the synagogue had great significance. He had no intention of setting aside the authentic traditions of old Israel; he came to renew them and bring the realisation of all that they foreshadowed. In doing this he identified with the role of Israel's prophets, as expressed in the first reading from Deuteronomy - a text looked upon as messianic in the time of Jesus. The people recognised that the teaching of the scribes – with their repetitious appeal to the authority of other interpreters of the Law – contrasted with the teaching of Jesus. In the tradition of the prophets, his teaching had a ring of authority, as it gave expression to Jesus' own convictions. Already there is intimated a contrast and conflict that is to shape the career of the Saviour.

The authority that so impresses the people is expressed, not only in word, but also in action. For the conflict that is to shape the life of Jesus is far more than a squabble about the interpretation of the Law. Sent by the Father as the world's Saviour, he must do battle with the forces of darkness and evil in the world. In the culture of the times, in which physical and mental illness were common associated with the presence of 'unclean spirits', Jesus gives expression to his authority by delivering those under the influence of the forces of evil. He delivers the man in the synagogue with a simple word of authority.

Mark emphasises the reaction of the people to this remarkable display of prophetic authority: 'Here is a teaching that is new, and with authority behind it'. Thus, in describing this eventful Sabbath, Mark alerts us to a subtext that will be present in his telling of the story of Jesus' ministry: Who is this man? Mark's gospel will seek to lead the reader beyond inadequate and superficial views of the Saviour, reflecting the challenge Jesus faced as he presented himself to his audiences. Though filled with vivid expectations of a messianic figure, the hopes of the people were crude and nationalistic. Jesus had to lead his followers to understand that his saving mission went far beyond these crude expectations. He would fulfil the hopes of Israel's faith by showing himself triumphant over all the forces of evil. In a dialogue with demons who recognise the true role of Jesus, Mark introduces a device he will use more than once to point to the answer that must be given to the question that is his subtext.

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