

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Jan 15th 2013

When my children were young (and even as they grew older), they would usually get a stronger, louder voice when I corrected them. But I doubt that was the kind of authority that astonished these people.

And the world is full of people who behave like windbags, spouting off on all kinds of things about which they know far too little. This behavior is neither authoritative nor astonishing; unfortunately, it is all too common. Real authority is rare and perhaps capable of astonishing us today. But what does it really look like?

We know from the first reading and elsewhere in Holy Scripture that Jesus does indeed have a singular foundation for authority. All things are under him. Through him all things were made, and nothing can elude this authority. Although we know this by faith, we do not see this fully in the broken world in which we find ourselves struggling forward. As St. Augustine wrote in one of his sermons, we are like doves cooing to God, as the Holy Spirit “makes known to us that we are in exile, and He teaches us to sigh for our native land, and we moan with that very longing.” (Augustine in His Own Words, p. 258, Harmless, S.J. ed.) This rings true, especially in troubled times when we need a little reassurance that God will indeed bring all things into order.

There is a sense in which actions sometimes speak louder than words, and the incident with the demoniac seems to demonstrate Jesus was not like the other religious teachers. But we need to come back to the nature of Jesus’ authority, in that Jesus caused astonishment even before the miraculous supernatural event. The evil spirits here cried out in response to Jesus’ authority, but they were driven by fear of their ultimate destruction. Not so with the man who needed to become free, who received abundant life. The others stood by and watched, perhaps with skepticism, perhaps with curiosity, and perhaps even with wonder at what this meant for them.

So an interesting question seems posed for us: What does Jesus’ authority look or sound like to us?

Can we put ourselves in the place of the folks in that synagogue, and wonder what Jesus would have said, and how he could have said it? Can we ask ourselves how we experience and sense Jesus? What does his authority look like to us? And how do we react to it? Does it make us free? Does it make us flee in fear? Do we just stand by and watch? As we move through our prayer today, let us ponder those questions and allow ourselves to encounter Jesus, Our Lord. And let us be astonished anew.

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