

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time: Teaching with Authority

It is said that the following incident took place off of Massachusetts back in the early 50's. It was a stormy night at sea and a large battleship saw a light in the distance. The light was directly on the ship's course. The captain of the ship was alerted and had a radio message sent out: "Light up ahead, bear ten degrees south." The captain received the reply, "Sir, you must bear ten degrees North." The captain grew furious and got onto the radio himself and yelled, "I am Captain James Smith, that's captain in the United States Navy. Whoever you are, I am ordering you to bear ten degrees south. Who are you, and what is your rank?" He heard the feeble answer, "This is Seaman First Class Howard Scott, Sir, you must bear ten degrees north." The captain barked out, "I am on the bridge of the Battleship USS New Jersey, and I am telling you to bear ten degrees south." Then he heard the reply, "But, Sir, I am in the Baker's Island Light House, and you had better bear ten degrees North."

A statement carries authority according to two aspects: who is speaking and what is being said. The captain had authority due to his rank. The seaman had authority due to what was said. Jesus had both. Jesus spoke with authority. What He said was true. He also had authority because of Who He was. He was the Son of God, the Messiah of God, and the Eternal One who became man on Christmas. He said, "Love your enemies. Be kind to one another." On the cross he called to his Father for forgiveness for those who tortured and killed him. He himself was a kind, loving person. He spoke about God's kingdom and lived as the ideal member of that kingdom. He had authority, and He has authority. We need to listen and follow.

He calls us to speak for Him. He gives us authority. For us to exercise this authority both our words to be true and we must live as committed Christians.

Many times our papers report religious scandals. Charismatic TV preachers, Roman Catholic bishops and priests, caught acting in the immoral ways. The message that they had been delivering from their pulpits for years was true. Many people were moved to come closer to God. Many people confronted their own demons and took steps to draw closer to Christ. But then the scandal hit the papers. The message of the preacher that had moved them was still true, but now it has lost much of its impact. The one who delivered it was not true to his own words. As a result his credibility, his authority was terribly damaged if not totally destroyed.

You can certainly see how this can happen in your home. Parents have authority due to their position in the family. God tells children to honor their mothers and fathers. That's the Fourth Commandment. But the authority of parents is diminished or even destroyed when the parents act in ways that are not Christian. For example, all parents want their children to be kind to each other. But if their children observe Mom and Dad being nasty to each other, the children are going to learn nastiness, not kindness, as standard way of acting. When these same parents say to their children that they should be kind to each other, the children respond with their actions as though their parents no longer have authority to tell them how to behave.

That's negative. Let's look at the positive. Many of our seniors have spent years taking care of their sick spouses. Retirement was not what they expected. Instead of going and doing, their days were spent caring and cleaning, and organizing doctor appointments. But when someone makes a comment that he or she is such a good spouse, the caring spouse merely says, "I took vows." And in those few words supported with a lifetime of action, that husband or wife speaks more eloquently about marriage than any priest or preacher could possibly speak. For his or her words have authority, the authority of the One who called him to the sacrament of marriage and the authority of the spouse who lives the sacrament of marriage.

Jesus spoke with authority. He was not like the scribes and pharisees. He was not two faced. He was not hypocritical. He didn't have a dark side of his life that he kept hidden. He didn't just speak the truth, He was the Truth Incarnate. Jesus gave orders to unclean spirits, and they obeyed him. It wasn't the words that kicked the devil out, it was the person who spoke those words.

He didn't call us just to do some of the things He did, He called us to be His presence for others. We are called to destroy evil in our world. We cannot do this unless we are determined to be Christlike.

Today we pray that we might be invested in the authority of Christ, an authority that flows not just from what we say, but from who we are as Christlike people.