

**SPIRITUALITY**

**GOSPEL ACCLAMATION**

Matt 4:16

**R.** Alleluia, alleluia.

The people who sit in darkness have seen a great light;

on those dwelling in a land overshadowed by death,

light has arisen.

**R.** Alleluia, alleluia.

**Gospel**

Mark 1:21-28; L71B

**Then they came to Capernaum, and on the sabbath Jesus entered the synagogue and taught.**

**The people were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes.**

**In their synagogue was a man with an unclean spirit; he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!”**

**Jesus rebuked him and said, “Quiet! Come out of him!” The unclean spirit convulsed him and with a loud cry came out of him. All were amazed and asked one another, “What is this?**

**A new teaching with authority. He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him.” His fame spread everywhere throughout the whole region of Galilee.**

**Reflecting on the Gospel**

We are all formally students for some time in our lives, and it is best to remain informal students throughout our lives, for there is no point at which there is not something we can learn. At the same time, most of us function as teachers at many points in our lives, some of us professionally but most of us casually, guiding and directing people in ways that might even escape us. We teach by how we live, how we treat people, how we respond under stress, how we reprimand a child, how we help a neighbor, as well as by more concrete and direct ways of teaching.

Some of us, by training and vocation, teach religion and theology, and it is those of us engaged in this vocation who must always remain students in our area of expertise, for Jesus says, “You are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah” (Matt 23:8-10; NRSV). This teaching is directed at all Christians, but it is a difficult teaching for those called upon to be teachers and instructors, for it is easy to forget that in the things of God we are always students.

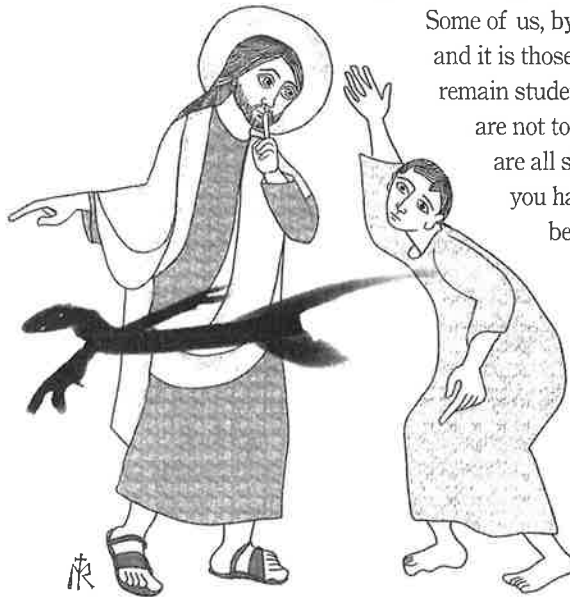
It is telling, and especially humbling for biblical scholars, to remember that Jesus did not choose his apostles from among the biblical interpreters or experts in Jewish Halakah (roughly equivalent to canon lawyers today) but from among the fishermen. How could fishermen be teachers in the Bible and Jewish law when they had

not been formally trained? What did they know that the experts did not?

What the fishermen knew, or were willing to encounter, was the only true subject: God. The unschooled fishermen knew Jesus, spent time with Jesus, and were willing to learn from Jesus what they did not know. It was not technical expertise that Jesus sought in his apostles but the willingness to encounter the word of God as life-changing and life-giving.

It was the encounter with truth that led the students, the crowds of ordinary people in Galilee, Judea, and elsewhere, to throng around the teacher Jesus; they responded as people hungry to learn the deepest reality about God and themselves. So, “on the sabbath Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. The people were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes.” The religious experts, the scribes, are mentioned, though it seems they are not present, as a contrast to Jesus’s authority. Perhaps the experts hung back, wary of how Jesus’s teaching might affect their livelihood or authority, or because they disagreed that Jesus’s authority was grounded in the Scriptures or God.

Yet, Jesus’s final act in the Capernaum synagogue is the demonstration of the divine ground of his teaching authority, for “[i]n their synagogue was a man with an unclean spirit; he cried out, ‘What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!’” Jesus healed the man of the unclean spirit, and the people were again “amazed,” referring to this action of Jesus as a “teaching”: “[They] asked one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching with authority.’” It is God’s presence and power that is the lesson not only to learn but to encounter.



It is necessary to have teachers in all areas of knowledge, and this includes theology and biblical studies. Expertise and properly ordered authority are essential for all fields. But ultimately we are all students of the one teacher, whose authority is ordered to our salvation and joy. From this school we never graduate; this teacher is always guiding us. This education is perfected for our final purpose: to know God.

**Focusing the Gospel**

**Key words and phrases:** [P]eople were astonished at his teaching.

**To the point:** Unlike in Luke’s gospel when Jesus attends the synagogue in Nazareth, reads from the scroll of Isaiah, and tells the people, “Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing” (4:21; NABRE), we don’t know exactly what Jesus preached in Capernaum. The only detail we are given is the people’s reaction to his words: astonishment. In particular, they compare his teaching to that of the scribes and remark on the “authority” Jesus displays. As the complete revelation of God, Jesus is named at the beginning of John’s gospel as the “Word,” and we continue to draw close to him whenever the Scriptures are proclaimed. May we also open ourselves to the shocking and challenging nature of Jesus’s preaching.

**Connecting the Gospel**

**to the first reading:** The people of Israel gather at the foot of Mount Sinai on the day Moses is given the Ten Commandments. While they watch and wait, Moses goes to the mountaintop to converse with God, and though God’s face is obscured in a “dense cloud” (Exod 19:9; NABRE), the people witness “thunder and lightning, the blast of the shofar and the mountain smoking” (Exod 20:18; NABRE). It’s no surprise that after seeing such a spectacle the people implore, “Let us not again hear the voice of the LORD, our God / nor see this great fire any more, lest we die.” Thousands of years later, the people again experience a direct revelation of God when Jesus of Nazareth enters into the synagogue in Capernaum to preach. Both Jesus’s words and actions cause amazement and the people gathered recognize he possesses “a new teaching with authority.”

**to experience:** Like the people gathered at the synagogue in Capernaum, we, too, gather to listen to the word of the Lord and to draw near to him in his body and blood. How do you find amazement in the words and actions of Jesus at this moment on your faith journey?

**Connecting the Responsorial Psalm**

**to the readings:** Today’s psalm calls to mind another event from the exodus: when the Israelites, freed from slavery in Egypt but before meeting God at Mount Sinai, grumble to Moses due to their thirst. They even go so far as to ask him, “Why then did you bring us up out of Egypt? To have us die of thirst with our children and our livestock?” (Exod 17:3; NABRE). Although the people had seen the power of the Lord at work in their escape from Egypt, they do not yet believe that God will continue to provide for all of their needs. In doubt and bitterness they quarrel and test the Lord, asking, “Is the Lord in our midst or not?” (Exod 17:7; NABRE).

**to psalmist preparation:** The psalmist invites us, even as we encounter our own trials and temptations, to “harden not your hearts.” How is God calling you to trust in his goodness?

**PROMPTS FOR FAITH-SHARING**

In the first reading God promises to raise up a prophet to speak his words to the people. Who are our modern-day prophets who call us to walk in the ways of the Lord?

The psalmist counsels, “If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.” What message is God inviting you to be open to this day?

St. Paul urges the Corinthians to be free of anxieties and distractions. What spiritual practices help you to be firmly centered in God’s peace?

In the gospel we hear that the people of Capernaum “were astonished” at Jesus’s teaching. What words of Jesus in the gospels do you find astonishing or even shocking?