

4th Sunday Ordinary Time Year "B".
January 30-31, 2021

Have you come to destroy us?

Readings: Deuteronomy 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 7:32-35; Mark 1:21-28

"Have you come to destroy us?" It was difficult to move past this line in today's Gospel, so manifestly provocative is the question. Who would think such a thing about Jesus? The simple explanation is that the man who uttered these words was under the influence of an unclean spirit.

In the Saturday morning cartoons of my youth, a character on the receiving end of an insult occasionally reacted by exclaiming, "Them's fightin' words." Those disputes were always handled in a humorous way—no one really got hurt, whether a heavy weight was dropped on their head, or they fell off a cliff. Poor grammar aside, it was all in good fun.

But in the world of today's Gospel, one could make a strong case that the man with the unclean spirit hurled "fightin' words." He felt emboldened enough to say to Jesus, "Have you come to destroy us?" Why utter them? The man also knew enough to refer to Jesus as "the Holy one of God." He was not confused as to his identity. Today's passage is of a single day of Jesus' ministry, including teaching, exorcism and healing all in one.

Some people today feel have set out to severely weaken or even destroy the Church we love. Long since dismissed as irrelevant to a modern mindset, the latest moves seem to indicate that another step is being taken. We do not simply disdain and hold your views in contempt. We are going to make it more difficult to disseminate them.

To cite just one example. Catholic World Report is a free internet news site. Its Twitter account linked to another website noting an appointment of a Dr. Rachel Levine to the new federal Administration.¹ The tweet was flagged, the account suspended.

¹ "Biden plans to nominate Dr. Rachel Levine, a biological man identifying as a transgender woman who has served as Pennsylvania's health secretary since 2017, to be HHS Assistant Secretary for Health. Levine is also a supporter of the contraceptive mandate.

Twitter censors deemed that the tweet violated its “rules against hateful conduct.”² The **hateful** conduct appears to have been in noting the biological sex of the appointee who now identified as transgender. Yet, the official announcement itself included the phrase “gender identity” clearly linking it with the appointee, noting, “She is a historic and deeply qualified choice to help lead our administration’s health efforts.”

Accusations of hatred are invoked with increased frequency and used as a cudgel to silence select voices. If I brand you as a hater, you lose credibility– you are cancelled. The judgement becomes purely subjective. Private companies may set their own rules; there is little recourse beyond public pressure. Non-Twitter users may just shrug it off. Yet upon further reflection, we should take it seriously because it sends a chilling signal.

Note that in today’s Gospel, we are not privy to the content of what Jesus was teaching; it is never revealed. We only know the astonishment of the people listening to him. But why were they astonished? Were they shocked or shaken out of their complacency? Were they amazed at his insights? Were they scandalized by his difficult truths that he taught, even offended? We do not know. We only see the backside, the aftermath.

Jesus was **teaching with authority**, making an absolute claim on the hearer, much more akin to the ancient prophets, than the scribes.³ That absolute claim upset the elites of his day, and it most certainly has upset the media, political and Hollywood elites of today.

Many are attempting to discredit those who are professing their sincere convictions, because those convictions are no longer aligned with what is deemed acceptable. Unfounded accusations of hatred are corrosive. A Twitter ban may just be the beginning.

² Twitter: “Specifically for: Violating our rules against hateful conduct. You may not promote violence against, threaten, or harass other people on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, religious affiliation, age, disability, or serious disease.”

³ Cf. footnotes of the New American Bible, note on Mark 1:21-45

With doctrinal positions that do not align with cultural mores of the day, might the Church's tax-exempt status be challenged? So, what is the proper response to insults? First, we do not let it disturb our peace. Be at peace; allow the love of the Lord to sustain and support you. We neither intentionally seek to sow discord, nor we are not hurling "fightin' words."

But neither can we shy from our witness, simply because of how the message is perceived. Wherever possible, we seek to work with others on areas of common interest. The Church's outreach to the poor is one example of building up the Body of Christ in love.

Let us pray for our Holy Father and our bishops, that they may be comforted and guided in their critical ministry of fostering unity in the Church. Our shepherds must always seek out the lost sheep, while also protecting the entire flock entrusted to their care. May they have courage even in the face of opposition, as we all try to share the truth in love.