

Fr. John's Homily for January 28, 2024. The 4th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jesus spoke *with authority*. I thought I might talk about that today. Let's set aside the miracles for the moment. Authoritative words always carry more credibility when a miracle is attached, so we're just talking about the spoken word today. Jesus once told us about His words. *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away*. So yes, we have been reading them and preaching them for 2,000 years now to every corner of the world. I'll start off with a scene from *The Chosen* from last year to give you a sense of what I'm talking about.

It was the *Sermon on the Mount*. And Jesus is up there speaking words that are different, edgy, revolutionary and most importantly, powerful. "*Where does this man get all this? We've never heard anything like this before*", someone said. Matthew, one of His disciples, is hearing all of this and it's touching his heart. And the message that really cut to the quick was the command, "*If you have anything against your brother, leave your gift at the altar, and go be reconciled to your brother. And then return and present your gift.*" Matthew immediately recognized that he had to go and apologize, not to his brother, but to his father. When Matthew made his decision to become a Roman tax collector, this was a source of great shame to his dad and his mom, family and friends. And the dad disowned his son. But, convicted by those words, Matthew worked up his courage and knocked on his father's door. And to our great surprise, dad opens the door, smiles, and says, "Hello, son." He, too, was on the mountain and his heart had also been changed.

These particular words of Jesus then are perhaps the classic example of speaking with authority. Words have power. They can change hearts and redirect lives. But as there are different kinds of words, there are also different types of power. Power for good, or for ill.

A number of names came to mind when I considered this theme of speaking with authority. And the first one that came to mind was Adolf Hitler. We've all seen the newsreels of him preaching the gospel of Nazism. He certainly was passionate. I wish I understood German so that I could literally understand what he said that influenced so many people. But it should be noted that instead of miracles to back up his words, he had something else working for him. Fear.

I would also say that President Kennedy spoke with authority. And he had a number of things going for him that helped reinforce that special gift. He was handsome, well bred, a war hero, he had a charismatic personality, and a beautiful wife and family.

Another passionate speaker that I grew up with was Bishop Fulton Sheen. He had a very popular TV show back in the 1950's that my mom and dad liked to watch on our Zenith TV. I was too young to appreciate him, but if you look back in retrospect, I think he spoke with authority. Videos are still available of those early shows for anybody who wanted to review them. And his cause has been introduced for sainthood.

Pope John Paul II and Mother Teresa both spoke with authority. People listened to them and lives were changed by their words regardless if they were spoken or written. Passionate might not be the best word to describe their preaching, nevertheless, they spoke with an authority that positively influenced a generation.

Then, of course, there was Martin Luther King and Billy Graham. Both protestant ministers who preached the good news passionately, and changed many lives in the process.

Is there anybody out there right now who qualifies as a passionate, hellfire and brimstone preacher? Well, I think that the messianic Jewish rabbi, Jonathan Cahn certainly qualifies. Look him up on YouTube and decide for yourself.

I would like to think that all of us would like to be able to say that we could, at least occasionally, speak with authority, and that our words carry at least a little bit of power whenever we share them with others. It's certainly true of me. It goes without saying that I want you to listen to me, and reflect, and say.... "Yes. I can believe in those words. I can trust in them, and I will allow them to change my life, for the better."

So then, what might be the ingredients of words spoken, either by you, or by me, and that might qualify us as being authoritative? Again, we will discount any miracles or even answered prayers. We should be good listeners. We shouldn't want to dominate the conversation. We should be humble, not desiring to have the last word in a discussion. And we should know what we're talking about. We should know our faith and be doing our homework so as to know what's going on. On the one hand, we should be detached from the stresses of the world, but we should not be disinterested either. We should not bury our head in the sand. And again, it goes without saying that we can't be hypocrites. Our lives have to be above reproach and we must do whatever we can to prevent people from saying, *Aha, that person doesn't practice what they preach*. Any authority we might have had quickly goes out the door when someone sees our double life..

But, I think the essence of all of this is the grace of God. It was promised by Jesus. Remember the passage about not worrying about what you're going to say when you're hauled in front of the courts or the synagogues? Jesus said, don't worry, and don't rehearse, because the Holy Spirit will give you what to say. Having said that, one of the things that I do, when I am hoping to share an authoritative word, is to pray beforehand. Take, for instance, getting in the habit of praying before you take a phone call. "Dear Lord bless this phone call." Pretty simple, heh?

Another one I like is The Prayer of Saint Francis. "*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace....*" Key words, 'make me.' I have personal experience with this one, and I encourage people to use it as they enter into encounters which might give them an opportunity to speak a word of authority.

Let me close with an example. I have this priest friend who has a few siblings who are all atheists. They've had many arguments over the years, but most of those arguments are based upon politics or questions of science or philosophy versus the church. There have been many hurt feelings, and even tears shed as a result of these tense encounters.

My friend recently went off to visit his sister for a few days of hopefully pleasant enjoyment of each other's company. Perhaps some dining out, some trivial conversation and maybe even to watch the Lions win a playoff game. All with an unspoken agreement to not bring up any touchy subjects. But I advised my friend to pray the Prayer of Saint Francis, stating upfront, "Lord, I'm going on a vacation. But, if you want me to evangelize my sister, you're going to have to make it happen. It's in your hands, Lord, but I will cooperate if you want me to be an instrument of your peace."

He took my advice, prayed the prayer, and waited. Sure enough on the morning of his departure his sister opened the can of worms and they had a knockdown dragout battle before he headed to the airport. But, he admitted, as he walked out the door, that for the very first time, he addressed

the basic difference between himself and his sister. “Sister, as a scientist, you’re worried about many things like vaccines, climate change, overpopulation and the ecological effects of pipelines. These are all legitimate concerns, but they all deal with an uncertain future. In my role as a priest, I deal with the here and now. My purpose is to help people get to heaven.” And he admitted to me that this was actually the very first time, in all their years, that he had ever literally evangelized his sister.

As painful as that experience was, I’m sure that Fr. Richard’s word for his sister had an air of authority. We can only hope that she now has something very, very important to think about. Namely, her own salvation. Only time will tell.

~Fr. John