

**Reflection on the Gospel-4th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 1:21-28)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

As schools reopen for another year, we are all invited to consider what it means to teach—not just with words, but with authority, the authority of gospel living. Today’s gospel brings us the first episode in a section of Mark’s gospel that focusses on a typical day in the ministry of Jesus as authoritative teacher and prophetic healer (1:21-38). The setting is the Capernaum synagogue on the Sabbath, a thoroughly Jewish setting. The verbal forms in the first sentence indicate that teaching in the synagogue was part of Jesus’ customary activity. Jesus is thus located firmly within Israel’s prophetic tradition of teaching and healing.

In the first reading from Deuteronomy (18:15-20), the term “prophet” appears eight times. Moses tells the people that God will respond to their request at Sinai (Horeb) and raise up from among them a prophet like himself, a mediator between God and God’s people, one who will speak God’s word. Prophets do not appoint or authorise themselves: God calls and authorises the prophets to speak God’s word. Failure to heed the prophets carries its own consequences as does the attempt to assume a prophetic role without God’s authorisation. Just as the prophets of old speak the authentic word of God only when they are authorised by the God of Israel, so Jesus of Nazareth, later to identify himself in this gospel as God’s prophet (6:4), speaks and acts “with authority”. In other words, he speaks with the authority of the God of Israel.

In this Markan story of divinely authorised activity, Jesus is approached by a man “with an unclean spirit”. The man’s loud scream sets up a confrontation between the power of God, mediated through Jesus, and the forces of destruction that often take hold of human lives. Jesus silences and expels these destructive forces and thus renders a seriously troubled person whole. Confounding the unclean spirit(s) brings social and communal benefits to the troubled person as well as physical and emotional healing.

God’s reign or empire is made real through a healing action that is perceived as “a new teaching”. No word of Jesus’ teaching is reported, only his actions. Those actions are presented as “teaching”. We teach by who we are and what we do. For Jesus, as for his disciples, congruence between words and actions is integral to authentic gospel proclamation and teaching.

This week marks fifty years since Biblical Studies was introduced into Victorian secondary schools. I was not to know in February 1965 what a grace-filled path was to open up for me when I tentatively volunteered to teach a biblical studies class. I give thanks for the students and readers, the smentors and colleagues who have been part of my five decade exploration into the Word of God.