

Dear Friends,

One of the surprising gaps in the Gospels is any description of what Jesus actually looked like. If you had known someone who had been in the synagogue in Capernaum and had heard that Jesus had healed the possessed man, you would have wanted to know what this Jesus was like. Would you have wanted to know how tall he was, the color of his hair, what he was wearing? But your friend who was a witness tells you something else – he taught with authority. This impression seems to block out everything else.

The lack of description in the Gospels of what Jesus looked like is a gap that can lead to a generous range of images as different communities recognize Jesus as one of their own. Today we mark Racial Justice Sunday, and the diversity of ways of seeing Jesus can not only give us insights into who Jesus was but also remind each one of us to see the presence of Jesus in both friend and stranger.

Jesus is seen as offering something new, something different to the scribes. Just as the Gospel writers do not tell us what Jesus looked like, neither does Mark actually tell us what Jesus taught at this time. In the opening chapters of Mark's Gospel, the only teaching is: "The time has come and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News." In keeping with the style of these initial chapters, where Mark moves quickly from place to place, it is short and to the point. Jesus is like a commander issuing instructions; the commands must be clear and brief so that they are understood and received – and that is what gives him authority.

That we are still listening to Paul's letters today tells us that the people of Corinth also recognized that Paul taught with authority and wished to pass on that teaching. Unlike the succinctness of Jesus in the Mark's account, Paul has more to say – developing his argument over longer sections. The danger is that we can miss the essence of what Paul is saying by being caught up in the way he is saying it. To contemporary ears, Paul may be presenting a series of stereotypes of men and women, but this may miss his main point. As it was true in 1st century Corinth so it is today that people lead busy lives and yes, we need to make time to listen to the Lord, but not so that we neglect the needs of others. Be holy but also be real.

Returning to the Gospel, in Mark's account words are not enough. What gives Jesus' teaching true authority is not only what he says but also what he does. When Jesus speaks to the possessed man, he is direct and to the point: "Be quiet! Come out of him!"

The possessed man responds to his command and is healed. This action causes the people to repeat that Jesus' teaching has authority.

In today's Gospel Jesus provided a model for leadership and gaining the respect of those whom we serve. At its heart is integrity between the person, what they say and how they say it, and their actions. To have authority is to have a match between who we are, what we say and what we do. In the opening chapter of Mark, it is not as though Jesus is saying easy things to people: people - "Repent and believe" and "Be quiet!" – but his authority means that they are able to listen and hear what they need to hear.

If we had been present in the synagogue in Capernaum, would we have been open to Jesus' new teaching and have recognized his authority?

Your friend in Jesus
Msgr. Zach