



Homily for the 4th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Cardiff Cathedral

Sunday 7th February 2021

Archbishop George Stack

“When I use a word” Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more or less”. “The question is”, said Alice in Wonderland, “whether you can make words mean so many different things”. “The question is”, said Humpty Dumpty, “Who is to be master? That’s all”.

We live in an age of mass communication. An age of instant communication. An age where words flow backwards and forwards in texts, emails, WhatsApp, Facebook and so many other means of communication. Yet the more words we use, and the quicker we use them, the less we seem to understand. The same word can so often be misunderstood. It can mean different things to different people. And apologising by saying: “I didn’t really mean what I said” is so often not accepted as an excuse for hurtful words.

At the heart of today’s gospel there are two words which are often misunderstood. They seem to be used interchangeably but, in truth, express two different realities. Those words are “Power” and “Authority”. Power without authority can be dangerous. Authority without power can be dismissed as empty. *“Here is a teaching that is new”, they said “And with authority behind it. He gives orders even to unclean spirits and they obey him”*. In Jesus, power and authority come together and are used, not to control, or force, or compel or

violate the freedom of people. His power is a force for good, used on behalf of others, it is the power of love, mercy and forgiveness. Hanging on the cross, he gives up his power in order to hand himself over completely for the good of others. *“I lay down my life of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and take it up again”*. (John 10:17-18). It is in the authority of this self-sacrificing love that he challenges all the things that would destroy the human spirit. We describe them in short hand language as “sins”. But that word itself contains a multitude of meanings. Each one of us could translate them into the language of our own life.

It is whilst hanging on the cross that Jesus asserts his ultimate authority – the authority of love. Even crucifixion and death cannot defeat him because on the cross he goes on revealing, goes on loving. He never says “These people are unforgiveable. I withdraw God’s love from them”. We have examples of people who exercised authority without apparent power even at the time of their death: Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Most recently, the heroic Archbishop Oscar Romero who said shortly before he was assassinated by a government death squad *“I have often been threatened with death, but I don’t believe in death without resurrection. Even if they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadorean people”*.

All of these things are contained within the healings and cures and teachings of Jesus. At the very beginning of his ministry, he is confronted by an unclean spirit who “possessed” the man who is thereby “dis-possessed”. The conflict between Good and Evil. The conflict between right and wrong. The struggle between darkness and light. These can only be resolved by Jesus who has both the power and authority of the Father *“All authority on heaven and on earth has been given to me”* (Matt28:18). The purpose of healings, and cleansing and miracles in the gospel is that those who are excluded from the community, excluded from worshipping God with others, can take their place again amongst the People of God. They are no longer dis-possessed.

I wonder if this gospel were being written today whether it would not describe a society “possessed by an evil spirit” called COVID? In so many ways, we think we exercise power over nature. We see nature is “controlled” and society “ordered” to our own needs and wants. “Miracle Cures” are available not just in hospitals or in surgeries but in beauty parlours and gymnasiums and health spas and so many other temples of vanity! But has this “evil spirit” possessed the world? Has it expressed its own authority? Though it may be repressed in one area, it may find other permutations to express itself where the vaccine does not reach. The words of

another great inspiration of our own time come to mind. One who taught “a teaching that is new and with authority”. Her actions spoke louder than words, and they speak equally loudly and prophetically today, not just to those who are dispossessed in our world, but those who are possessed by things which seem essential to our existence. Mother Teresa said, *“Live simply so that others may simply live”*. But then again, the same word “simply” can mean so many different things to different people!
