

January 28 and 29, 2012
The Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

After Jesus drives out the unclean spirit, and by the way that's pretty cool, there is this excited reaction from the crowd: "What is this? A new teaching with authority. He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him." There's a lot of truth in that response, because the Word of God has real power.

Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, the papal preacher, recalls a story about a man who was a hopeless alcoholic, unable to go more than two hours without drinking. He went with his family to a Word Service during which a single line of scripture, as he put it, seemed to go through him like fire, and he knew that he had been healed. He was, indeed, able to stay away from the bottle, and shared all this with Fr. Cantalamessa. Fr. Cantalamessa asked the man, what this line of scripture was. With tears in his eyes, the man quoted the Song of Songs: "The love of God is sweeter than wine."

Such a fantastic story at once delights and, I think, in our age, causes a bit of skepticism. Our age is glutted with words. We know, on the one hand, that messages, information, speeches can and do change the course of events. The right words, the right speeches, rally people to causes and drive out evils: We hold these truths to be self-evident, Four score and seven years ago, I have a Dream. Yet, we know, on the other hand, that there are no magic words. No bundle of mere words can really cure a person.

To understand Fr. Cantalamessa's story in that sense, though, as a tale of magic words, is to get right only as much as the crowd did in Jesus' day. It is not the teaching, it is not the bundle of words itself that is the cause of these wonders. The power and the authority rest in a person, in God.

The unclean spirits recognize this; they are forced to. The unclean spirit does not say "I know that you know the secret words." Rather, trembling, he says, "I know who you are." The Word of God is not a collection of phrases, or a book. It is a person.

Unlike the spirits, though, we are not forced to see this. Like the crowd, like all human beings down the centuries, God leaves us un-coerced. We are free to recognize Him, or focus on other things, to accept or reject.

But if we do accept, if we acknowledge not so much the what but the Who, the world changes. The Scriptures, the Church, the Sacraments, all become moments when no less than Jesus speaks and acts. What was once words on a page becomes writing somehow urged and guided by the Holy Spirit. What was once just a man and woman, dressed in some nice clothes, making promises in front of friends becomes Jesus Christ, promising to lay down his life for his impossibly beautiful bride, the Church. What was once just the aging head of a micro-state,

becomes the vicar of Christ, successor to St. Peter, still proclaiming, that death is conquered and there is hope.

What if, for a moment, you let the veils fall away and watched as he moves in our time, in this place, just as he did before the crowd in the Gospel? What if you recognized and believed His Word at work in your life? "I Baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." "I absolve you from your sins." "For this is my body, which will be given up for you."