

Homily based on the readings from January 28, 2024 (Deuteronomy 18.15-20; 1 Corinthians 7.32-35; Mark 1.21-28)

I do not mean to sound flippant, but today's Gospel reading plays out almost like a scene from a modern horror movie. I cannot speak for anyone else, but if I had been present at the synagogue in Capernaum, I would have been terrified by the demon's response to Jesus: *I know who you are – the Holy One of God*. That one line makes it clear that we are not witnessing a simple interchange between human beings, but a clash between cosmic forces beyond our comprehension. Both Jesus and the unclean spirit recognize each other immediately. There is no doubt as to which of them will triumph, but that is only because one of the combatants is Christ himself.

There are a number of important lessons we can take from this reading. This episode provides the first example, at least within the Gospel of Mark, of Jesus performing a miraculous healing – the first demonstration of his boundless compassion for the people he

encounters. This event also gives us our first true glimpse of Christ's ability to overcome the forces of darkness. On a deeper level, this passage demonstrates – in rather dramatic fashion – that *knowledge* about Jesus is not the be-all and end-all of Christian life. Knowledge, in itself, will not get us very far – unless it is accompanied by *action*.

As Christians, we place a great deal of emphasis on what we know about Christ – as well we should. In just a few minutes, we will all join together in professing the Nicene Creed – a summary of Christian dogma dating back nearly 1700 years. The Christian faith is shaped by our distinctive doctrines: the Incarnation, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus Christ; the inscrutable but essential mystery of the Holy Trinity; the saving power of the Sacraments, particularly the Real Presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist. Nevertheless, *belief* is just a starting point – the first step in the lifelong journey of building a relationship with Jesus Christ. As with any relationship, what matters most is how we choose to *act*.

Think, for a moment, about our most important human relationships – with our parents, our spouses, our children, whoever it is. These relationships all begin with a form of knowledge – a recognition of the names and identities of the other people, of their particular likes and dislikes, of the qualities that make them unique. What truly defines our relationships, though, is the way we *act* toward each other – the respect and honor we give our parents, the tenderness and fidelity we give our spouses, the care and compassion we give our children. Even our failures and shortcomings, despite the sadnesses they cause, contribute to the complicated tapestry of our relationships.

The same principle applies to our relationship with Jesus Christ. Even though the unclean spirit *knew* who Jesus was – in fact, he probably could have rattled off many of the statements that would later be included in the Nicene Creed – the demon still chose, willfully and intentionally, to stand in opposition to Christ. Each of us has a similar decision to make. To quote the Letter of Saint James: “You believe that God is one. You do well. Even the *demons* believe that and tremble”

(2.19). Again, *knowledge* is not enough. Our *actions* determine our relationship with Christ.

From a practical perspective, what sort of actions are we talking about?

The simple answer, of course, is *all of them*. Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the animating force of the universe.

There is no action we could possibly take that would not have some impact on our relationship with *him*. Nevertheless, there are two types of action that are incomparably important to our relationship with Jesus: our *worship* and our *mercy*.

Remember what Jesus was doing in today's reading: he was visiting the synagogue, the house of prayer. When people think about *action*, they often envision something external – something physical – but internal actions can be just as powerful, if not more so. Our relationship with Christ is built on a foundation of prayer. Without prayer, nothing else has any meaning. Ignoring our prayer life is like not talking with our spouse. We may be able to coexist for a period of time, but eventually

such a relationship is *bound* to break down. Any *authentic* relationship requires active engagement, and *worship* is our preeminent form of engagement with Jesus Christ.

With regard to *mercy*, consider how Jesus went out of his way to heal both the physical and the spiritual suffering he encountered. We may not possess Jesus' supernatural abilities, but we can certainly offer our care and compassion to people who are in pain. Every single one of us has the power to feed the hungry; to give drink to the thirsty; to clothe the naked; to shelter the homeless; to visit the sick and the imprisoned; and to bury the dead. Through the actions we take, we can serve as living beacons of the love of Christ to our fellow men and women – and, in so doing, express our undying love for Christ himself.

I mentioned earlier that today's Gospel reading seems like it could have come from a horror movie. If someone were making a film about *our* relationship with Jesus, what would it look like? Perhaps a bit of a

comedy and a bit of a tragedy – but, in the end, we *all* need to make sure it turns out the same way: as a *love story*.