

Fr. John Sassani
Homily Given on January 29, 2006
Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Liturgical Year B

When I'm channel surfing, there are some things that I will always choose. One is CSI – another is Whose Line Is It Anyway? There are certain movies I'll always watch. One of them is Moonstruck, about the romantic escapades of an Italian-American family. There is a subplot involving Olympia Dukakis as Mrs. Castorini who wonders, "Why do men have affairs?" and the answer she comes to is that they fear death.

Why do I mention this? Because fear, perhaps especially fear of death, is the essential, unmentioned element of today's Gospel. At a Sabbath service, Jesus gives a remarkable homily and the crowd is astonished. Then there is a horrible intrusion. A man possessed screams out. Clearly an unclean spirit is in charge of the man. The man is afraid – the crowd is afraid. In the chaos, Jesus asserts his authority for the sake of the man – for the sake of the crowd – for our sake.

Jesus has just had his own confrontation with evil in the desert. St. Mark tells us three things: he was tempted by Satan, he was among the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him. The experience prepared him humanly for his divine work. So, in the synagogue, Jesus is moved to act. This gut-wrenching episode reminds him of his own confrontation with evil. He takes the part of the man in need. His action indicates that his authority isn't simply for learning – it is divine power, the power to save. Trauma has erased the memory of the sermon, but the triumph of his authority over fear and evil left a lasting impression on the crowd – not to mention on the man.

Fear and evil encompass a range of experiences, from those of the man possessed through to the anxieties of life that St. Paul speaks of. He tells the Corinthians to be free of anxiety. That's not just a nice wish but a conviction born of a deeply felt experience of the divine power of Christ. Paul was freed from his past and from all the fear he had in his ministry in the face of persecution, shipwreck, murderous threats, imprisonment, even execution. He knew how fear and evil could get the upper hand in his life. He knew the power of Christ that freed him from fear and gave him the upper hand in the face of evil.

Today's Gospel would be so easy to dismiss as being meaningless – except that we know that there are things that possess us, get the upper hand on us. Not just impatience, not just envy or jealousy, but all kinds of gut-wrenching fears: addictions...moral evils like Mr. and Mrs. Castorini are dealing with in Moonstruck...natural evil, like serious illness and death. All of these can get the upper hand on us.

Christ is the one, the Holy One of God, who takes the upper hand to help us to be rid of fear, to be full of confidence, to be able to move forward (even if there is no exterior change), by His compassionate, loving authority. As we worship Him today, let's bring Him those things that have the upper hand and rely on his power and authority to help and save us. chaos, Jesus asserts his authority for the sake of the man – for the sake of the crowd – for our sake.