

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Feb 1st 2015

Mark's gospel marks the inauguration of Jesus' public ministry with a scene in which he demonstrates his teaching and his power over an "unclean" spirit. Trying to grasp what they have observed, the gathered crowd describes the particular quality of his teaching: he teaches as "one having authority."

This teaching authority is matched by his authority over evil. Yet, for all that, the crowd does not seem to be able to identify the source of this authority and power. The source is identified by an unlikely voice—that of the possessed man, who shouts out: "I know who you are — the Holy One of God!"

Throughout the gospel of Mark, amidst the continual teaching and miracle-working of Jesus, the question lingers: Who is this man? This continues until, at the moment of his death on the cross, another unlikely voice reveals Jesus' identity: the Roman soldier who sees Jesus die calls out: "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

We can admire the teachings of Jesus. And why not? They have had a major influence on the western world and much beyond. We can marvel at the miracles described in the gospels. But do we really grasp and abide in the truth of WHO HE IS? Jesus, not merely a "good man" or the "best of men," but the Holy One of God, the Son of God.

And what difference would that make? If we could grasp in a consistent way the truth of who he is, would that change anything in our lives?

Thomas Merton, Trappist monk and one of the best known American Catholics of the last century, experienced his conversion journey in stages. One of the most important experiences of that journey occurred when he visited the Church of Saints Cosmas and Damian in Rome. As he gazed at the mosaic of Christ in glory which surrounds the altar, it suddenly dawned on him: the Jesus spoken of by Christians is no mere "historical figure" but the Lord who is alive and who interacts with those who believe in and worship him. This experience contributed powerfully to Merton's conversion to a deeper Christian faith, then to the Catholic faith and eventually to his monastic vocation.

Have we encountered Jesus in this way, as someone alive and who is in relationship with us? Or do we still relate to him as someone from "back then" and "out there"? Pope Francis, in quoting words of his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, reminds us: "Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction."

Jesus, draw us to know you in our hearts as you are: the Holy One of God, the Son of God, our Savior and Lord, alive and in our midst!

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