

**Homily for January 29, 2006  
Fourth Sunday of the Year (B)**

**By Father Charles Bowes**

**Deuteronomy 18:15-20**

**Psalm 95:1-2, 6-9**

**1 Corinthians 7:32-35**

**Mark 1:21-28**

## *Jesus touches even the demon of anxiety.*

Saint Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 7, says to his people, “I should like you to be free of anxieties.” Jesus himself taught us that repenting and believing in the good news of the kingdom of God is the best way of assuring that we can live our lives free from anxiety:

“Consider the lilies of the field – they neither toil nor spin, yet not even Solomon in all his glory was arrayed like one of these,” says John 7. And when Jesus speaks with authority in Mark chapter 1, people listen... and not because they know who he is, or think that he has political power, or see him as a leader or elder. His authority comes from his deep, personal and intrinsic relationship with the Father. He teaches as one who has experienced God firsthand. He is the Word, the revelation of the Father. His authority comes from his being and, even if people fail to recognize who he is, they respond to the authority – the power – that dwells in him. People sense his certainty and calm and know that he speaks the truth. And it is that strength, that divinity, that saving power we so long to tap into.

I know I wrestle with a demon of anxiety – I have for years. I worry, fret, run things over in my mind – all sorts of pastoral issues, school-planning issues – they don’t let go of me, and I don’t let go of them.

The widely popular series of books, *Don’t Sweat the Small Stuff* by Richard Carlson, expresses much of what we know about the effects of anxiety today. Titles from various chapters of the book say it all: “Make Peace with Imperfection,” “Remind Yourself that When You Die, Your ‘In Basket’ Won’t Be Empty,” “Learn to Live in the Present Moment,” “Repeat to Yourself: ‘Life Isn’t an Emergency.’”

As well intentioned as they are, self-help books like Carlson’s really fuel the notion that we can control our lives and, by sheer force of will, exorcise our own demon of anxiety. The spirit of anxiety thrives on our need to control. Many of our anxieties and worries stem from our need to control events and other people, just as the unclean spirit attempted to control Jesus by claiming to know his name and who he was. But to tell the truth, only God is in control. The spirit of anxiety’s attempt to be in control is a lie, because only God has ultimate power over us.

In our lives today, worry and anxiety have taken on demonic proportions. It is telling that in Saint Mark’s Gospel, Jesus’ first miracle isn’t turning water

into wine (as in St. John's gospel), but rather an exorcism wherein Jesus sets a person free from something inside that imprisoned and tortured. And it is that sort of demon that anxiety is for me, and for many, that we bring to the Lord Jesus.

I find that trying to deal with my anxieties head on is an invitation to failure and frustration. An old spiritual axiom says never to confront a temptation directly, but to make yourself smaller or larger than it... or leave it altogether. I make myself smaller or larger than an anxiety through prayer – using the especially trying moment to pray – pray anything, but pray. The best prayers I find are the briefest: “Lord, help me.” “Lord, be with me now.” As St. Benedict was fond of saying, “Good prayer is brief, except for those rare occasions when we are called to pray longer.” And if I really have a moment, I ask a question: “Lord, were you ever anxious?” And in that split second of waiting for an answer, God is near – not necessarily solving the problem, but near – and I'm not alone. I do believe that the companionship by the Spirit so available through the life of baptism planted in us assures us that no matter what, we are loved by God...and God is as close as our own hearts.

Jesus touches even the  
demon of anxiety.