

4th Sunday OT – (Year B) – January 28, 2018

DT 18:15-20; PS 95:1-2, 6-7, 7-9; MT 4:16; MK 1:21-28

In our Gospel passage for today, Jesus is teaching in the synagogue, and he's apparently got the **full attention** of *everyone* in the place.

Any preacher can tell you that having an **entire congregation's full attention** is virtually *impossible*, especially in **our age of tiny attention spans**. But it looks like Jesus might have pulled it off! His instructional method is remarkably different from that of other teachers, and the entire congregation is hanging on his every word.

Everyone in the congregation...but *one* guy...

That one guy...way in the back...who's staring intently at his **cell phone screen** *while Jesus is teaching!*

You can just imagine Jesus motioning to one of his disciples to remind people from the pulpit to put their cell phones away while in the synagogue. Despite the announcement, the rude guy in the back is thinking, "**Go ahead, Jesus, I'm listening**" ... *while he continues to scroll through his newsfeed without even looking up!*

Can't **imagine** such a thing **happening**?

Well, every time someone uses their cell phone during Mass, they're *essentially* doing the same thing—**ignoring Jesus**, present in the **Sacred Scriptures** and in the **Holy Eucharist**...and thinking it's no big deal because *that's just what people do nowadays*.

Returning to the Gospel passage, a man in the synagogue, tormented by a **demon** starts **screaming** at Jesus, **disturbing** the reverent environment and **interrupting** his teaching.

Without missing a beat, the **guy** in the back of the synagogue **with the phone**, who couldn't even bother **looking** at Jesus, springs into action, captures the possessed man on video, posts it on **YouTube** and, gets more than **500,000 likes**, becoming an internet sensation...for about two days, that is...until a controversial Tweet by **President Herod** becomes the talk of the internet.

Never mind that "**synagogue cell phone man**" has not grown **one iota** closer to Jesus, because he was more interested in his **Messenger app** than he was in hearing the **message of the Messiah**.

In a world full of cell phone addicts, such a scene is so commonplace that hardly anybody objects to such inappropriate behavior.

In the 1st Reading for today's Mass, Moses promises his people ***“a prophet like [himself]”*** (cf. Deut 18:15) who will speak words placed in his mouth by ***God himself***. Moses is addressing the terror the people felt when God spoke to them the **first time** from mount Horeb with **thunder** and **lightning**, such that the people begged to never hear or see God in that way again. Jumping back three books to the **Book of Exodus**, we read:

Now as all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning...and the mountain smoking, they became afraid and trembled. So they took up a position farther away and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we shall die.” (Ex 20:18-19)

That's why, in today's 1st Reading from **Deuteronomy**, Moses reminds the people:

This is exactly what you requested of the LORD, your God, at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, “Let [us] not again hear the voice of the LORD, [our] God, nor see this great fire any more, or [we] will die.” (Deut 18:16)

In the **Gospel** passage for today, we see this ***promise of Moses fulfilled in Jesus***, as people see and hear this **new prophet** teaching in an utterly **unique** and **penetrating** way...even **commanding demons**, who obey him **immediately!**

The people are mesmerized by Jesus, listening intently to him.

Speaking of **listening intently** to Jesus...or **not** listening to him...

Just this week while hearing Confessions, several people described feeling distant from God. They were upset at God, **complaining that he doesn't listen to them**.

My first question to each of these penitents was, **“Do you have a smartphone?”**

Puzzled by my ***seemingly unrelated question***, they each answered, **“Yes”**.

Then I pulled out my cell phone and said, **“Do you ever have anyone do *this* to you?”** as I stared at my cell phone while saying to the penitent, **“Go ahead, I'm listening.”**

Each one of them chuckled sheepishly and said, **“Yes”**.

I then asked, “**How much time do *you* spend on average— *per day*—on *your* phone?”**

The answers varied slightly, but all were using their phone for *multiple hours per day*.

So, I asked, “**How much time do you spend in *prayer* per day?”**

Predictably, their **prayer time** was *much less* than their **screen time**.

So, I said, “**Then you’re doing to *God*—with *your* phone—what you get frustrated at your friends for doing when they do the same thing to *you* with *their* phone.**

No wonder you feel like *God’s* not responding to *you*.

You’re not paying any attention to *him!*”

Now, when the complaints in Confession are more **extreme**, touching on things like **self-harm** and **suicidal thoughts**—*especially among teens*—I always ask, “**Are you on social media?”**

Invariably, the answer is “**Yes**”.

So, I’ll ask the kid, “**Do you ever feel like all the other kids have fun, exciting lives with lots of friends, and great activities...while you feel *lonely, isolated, and unpopular?*”**

The answer is almost always, “**Yes**”.

What’s clear to a priest who hears lots of Confessions is, **regrettably, *not*** so clear, even to ***highly intelligent adults and young people***—namely, that **internet addiction, particularly though cell phones**, is one of the **surest destroyers** of our **relationship with God** and our relationships with **other people**.

Our **Psalm** today proclaims:

If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Great advice...but a very big “**if**”.

If...today you hear his voice...

The problem is that most people today have *made themselves* utterly deaf to the Lord's voice by their *addiction to distraction*.

And it's a terribly vicious circle because the **distraction** keeps us from dealing with the **emptiness in our hearts**, which we try to fill with more and **more distraction**, which **increases the emptiness**, and which, ultimately, makes us *unable to hear to the Lord's voice*.

At the same time, our inability to hear Jesus makes us far more **vulnerable** to the **Devil**, who *loves to lead us further and further away from the Lord*, in a manner that many people these days **don't even notice**.

Let's think for a moment about **God's warning** in the **1st Reading**. God said to Moses:

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their kindred, and will put my words into the mouth of the prophet; the prophet shall tell them all that I command. Anyone who will not listen to my words which the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will hold accountable for it. (Deut 18:18-19)

How does God hold us accountable? By letting us **experience the consequences** of our free choices. Jesus himself, *many centuries after Moses*, would say:

“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you? Every one who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep, and laid the foundation upon rock; and when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house, and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But he who hears and does not do them is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation; against which the stream broke, and immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great.” (Lk 6:46-49)

Many people, these days, feel like their life is **falling apart**—or that it has *already collapsed* to the point that they have fallen into **depression** or even *despair!*

Returning now to the Gospel, it's fascinating to consider the **similarities** between the **reaction of the possessed man** as Jesus drove out the **demon**, and the **withdrawal symptoms that social media users experience** when they attempt to give up their **screen addiction**.

The Gospel today tells us that after Jesus commanded the demon to come out of the man...

The unclean spirit convulsed him and with a loud cry came out of him. (Mk 1:26)

The key word here is “**convulsed**”.

Back in 2012, an article in *Current Psychiatric Reviews*...

“...noted that Internet addiction “ruins lives by causing neurological complications, psychological disturbances, and social problems.”

Symptoms of ***Internet addiction withdrawal*** include depression, irritability, anxiety, sweating or shakiness, insomnia, mood changes, and—in rare cases—a psychotic break with reality.

One sign of **Internet Addiction Syndrome** is that a person becomes **[a]ngry or defensive...when someone comments on [their] behavior.**” <https://www.everydayhealth.com/internet-addiction/guide/>

Angry or defensive reactions, huh?

Recall what the **angry demon screamed** at Jesus in today’s Gospel:

“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?”
(cf. Mk 1:24)

To someone who is **captive to the devil**, Jesus is a **threat**. To someone who is in **genuine relationship with Jesus**, he is **peace**. Anxiety is not peace. Which is why **St. Paul** wrote, in our **2nd Reading** today:

I should like you to be free of anxieties. (1 Cor 7:32)

In this **Letter to the Corinthians**, St. Paul is comparing the single, celibate life with married life to demonstrate how, **even in the beautiful interpersonal relationship in marriage**, it’s a tremendous challenge to keep focused on Jesus. It’s not hard to imagine some of the married couples in Corinth **getting offended** at St. Paul, as if he’s saying marriage is bad—***which he’s not saying***. Instead, he’s exposing the difficulty of **balancing our human relationships with our relationship with God** in a way that brings us **peace**.

Seeming to **anticipate the negative reaction**, St. Paul wrote:

I am telling you this for your own benefit, not to impose a restraint upon you, but for the sake of propriety and adherence to the Lord without distraction. (1 Cor 7:35)

In the same way, whenever a person raises the question of **addiction to social media** and the **internet**, he or she is bound to get an earful from those who think that the person is saying “**the internet is bad**”. It’s not the **internet** that’s bad...it’s the **addiction to the internet** that’s bad.

And the last thing an addict wants to do is admit their addiction!

Jesus came to proclaim the Good News of our **immense dignity** as God’s beloved sons and daughters, and our **exalted destiny** of eternity with him in Heaven.

Some are able to receive this word with **joy** and bear **abundant spiritual fruit**.

Others, need **first** to be freed *by Jesus* from whatever **diabolical interference** prevents his words from penetrating their hearts.

This can certainly be painful, especially when we’ve become **addicted to the impediments** to God’s love and **don’t want to let them go**.

In the **Gospel of Matthew**, Jesus said:

“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.” (Mt 6:24)

Many people these days are clearly more devoted to their **phones** than they are to their **friends**, their **family** or their **Lord**.

And they wonder why they’re so unhappy!

Like St. Paul, Jesus wants us to be free **from** anxieties—not to mention free from **addictions**—so that we can be free **for** a relationship with him.

Jesus will honor whatever choice we make—**for** or **against** him.

Obviously, we had better choose well.