

Fourth Sunday of the Year January 28, 2018

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 7:32-35; Mark 1:21-28

God's word comes to us in various ways. The Bible tells us that this word is very powerful and effective in our life and will bear fruit in plenty. This word clings to the human person, penetrates deeply into our hearts giving us new insights and applies it thoroughly to our lives. God expects us to be conscious of the working of this word in our lives and respond to it. His word is a healing word. It purifies the person and takes away all the blemishes. It is a prophetic word which leads the person towards the values of God as against the values of the world. It is a reconciling word which keeps away all divisions and brings unity in the community. In the first reading of today we have Moses the prophet giving his farewell address to the people of Israel. He tells them they will always have God's word to guide them as they enter into the Promised Land. God will give them a prophet like himself to take care of them. In the second reading Paul gives advice to both married and the unmarried. He wants them to be free of all their anxieties and offer their single hearted service to God. In the Gospel we have the typical day in the life of Jesus. He was a preacher, teacher, healer and a man of prayer. Today's passage tells us about Jesus as he is preaching and teaching the word of God. It also demonstrates the power and authority of Jesus as he expels an unclean spirit from a man and heals him. People look at him with admiration for he spoke with authority and power.

In the First Reading Moses assures the people that God will not abandon them and after his death would continue to speak to them through prophets. They ought to listen to these representatives of God just as they listened to Moses. If they chose to ignore the prophets they would place their lives in danger as they would be liable to punishment from God. On the other hand if the Prophet misleads the people by proposing the word of God as mere human fabrication, then he will die. Moses was addressing the people of Israel encamped at the bank of the Jordan River, with the Promised Land in view. Here Moses wanted to impress upon the people the absolute importance of remaining loyal to God once they cross the river Jordan and enter the land of their ancestors. If they remained faithful to the covenant they would enjoy many advantages in their homeland. Hardships would come if they broke the terms of the covenant. They had to realize that they needed God in

the Promised Land as they needed him in the wilderness. Moses told them that God was present with them at Mount Horeb. People truly understood their unworthiness to be close to God as the mountain exhibited the divine fire. They had heard the word of God through Moses since they were afraid to hear that voice directly. Even now people would love to hear that voice but it would come to them through the mortal persons namely the Prophets. The function of a prophet was to be mediator between God and man and God promised to raise a prophet just like Moses which is fulfilled in Jesus.

In the Second Reading of today Paul tells the believers to lead the life that the Lord has assigned them, to which God has personally called them. Being inspired by the Holy Spirit and trusting in him, Paul tells the believers that God wants them to be free from all anxieties. The virgin, the unmarried man and woman, are called to be anxious about the affairs of the Lord, on how to please the Lord so they may be holy in body and spirit. Those who were married experience anxieties regarding the affairs of the world, how to please their spouses, their interest being divided between God and the world. To live free of anxieties, those who are married must be reasonable, not placing any restraint upon them. They have to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord. At the same time, being caught up in the affairs of the world, they had a commitment towards their spouses and their families. They must not neglect this calling, for the Spirit of God dwells within everybody. Showing love towards others in obedience to the Commandments, a Christian can enjoy a living faith in Christ that is different from the religious life but still very pleasing in the eyes of God. When God promised to raise a prophet for the people, this promise was not just for those who are virgins but also for those who are married. This proof is found in the Sacrament of Marriage that is Sacred in the eyes of God.

In the Gospel Mark speaks in detail the first reported day in the public life of Jesus. It was a Sabbath Day when Jesus began his ministry with his fellow townsmen in the synagogue. The setting of today's Gospel episode was the synagogue in Capernaum. The synagogue was not necessarily a building. It was a gathering of the faithful for the purpose of studying the Scriptures and the synagogue service was basically prayer service. It was not uncommon for these meeting to take place in a home. At the time of Jesus people went to the Temple to offer sacrifice and to pray particularly during the time of festivals. But they went to the synagogue to pray mainly on Sabbath day and to learn their Sacred

Texts. In today's Gospel, we heard that Jesus entered the synagogue and taught in Capernaum. Those who heard him were astounded at his teachings because he taught with authority and not like the scribes who normally taught in that place. Here, the authority of Jesus is compared to a rabbi who had the power to impose a decision with a binding authority as against a scribe who could not do so because he was only a teacher of a lower rank. However, the Jews recognized the Scribes as authoritative teachers of the Law and custom. The authority of Jesus is seen throughout the New Testament where he overthrows the rule of Satan, the Prince of this world, by establishing the invisible Kingdom of God on earth.

In the gospel Mark presents Jesus to us as a preacher, teacher, a miracle worker and a man of prayer. He gives it to us as if it was his normal daily routine of his public life. There was also the astounded reaction of the ordinary people. He taught them scriptures, preached on them, healed a demoniac, healed Simon Peter's mother in law, and healed all those who came to him with their ailments. He was a teacher who taught the word of God through his person and life. A Teacher is one who imparts scholarly knowledge to others through his personal life and experience. The very life of Jesus was his teaching. Throughout his life, Jesus never ceased for a single instant from his teaching responsibility to his People whom God had chosen for himself. The entire life of Jesus had been a life of teaching: not only were his words were an expression of his teaching, but also, and most of all, his entire person was in himself, was a teaching. He not only imparted truth in his teaching, but he also gave the help needed to understand and accept it. A good but merely human teacher works from outside, and hopes his message will enter into the mind of his listener. Christ's word, on the other hand, can enter the person and reach their minds and hearts. With their assent, it can clear all obstacles and permit them to fully accept the truth of his word.

Jesus taught people the love of God from his heart as he was close to his father. He taught with absolute conviction and authority in his message because he was aware that his message was in accordance with the mind of God. In the life of St Francis of Assisi it is said that he called one day a brother and said let us go to teach the good news in the town. Both of them set out and just walked round the town without uttering a word of preaching. Instead they greeted all on the way, had a kind words for the onlookers. When the brother asked Francis when they would stop to preach, he replied that their entire walk they had was his teaching to people. Jesus is presented to us today as a preacher.

He preached the word of God and he did it delicately. He preached about God and his saving work among the people chosen by him. He would have explained the presence of God among them and his own role as God's chosen one. There was something attractive in his teaching and they longed to listen to him.

It is within this context that Jesus performed his first miracle as given in the gospel of Mark and this miracle was one of exorcism. The passage tells us that there was in the audience a man possessed by an unclean spirit. This unclean spirit quickly recognized Jesus as having the power to expel demons and attempted to fend him off by showing that he knew exactly who Jesus was, the Holy One of God. He even questioned him why he had come to destroy the power of the evil in the world and he should have nothing to do with them. Certainly, the unclean spirit was not professing any faith in Jesus but was attempting to suppress the power of Jesus by recognizing him as the exorcist. This first miracle performed by Jesus is an exorcism which is affirmed by the word that is used here to say "rebuke", the word also means "to exorcise." This miracle of an exorcism is a sign that evil is destroyed in the Divine Presence of Jesus. The evil spirit that possessed the man recognized Jesus as the Messiah, who is anointed with God's Spirit and who possessed power over evil spirits. The evil spirit called the name of Jesus twice, first as Jesus of Nazareth and then as the Holy One of God. While Jesus had been trying to hide his true identity as the Messiah from the crowd and not from his true followers, the demons that recognized his true identity, manifested it to all.

In this miracle Jesus showed the upper hand without any struggle and did the healing of the possessed person. He commanded the unclean spirit to be silent and to come out of the man. This convincing exercise of power only adds further amazement to the people. Once that happened, those who were present were filled with awe and wonder. Their reaction was one of fear and astonishment. They said to one another that it was a new teaching where a person could use his power and authority. He had command even the unclean spirits, and they obeyed him. The people had never seen such great power, nor ever heard of it since the days of Moses. Later, during his public life when the soldiers go to arrest him and come back empty, they told the authorities that no one spoke like him and they could not arrest him. The authority of Jesus went beyond performing miracles in the visible world. He had the authority over the invisible world as much as over the visible

one. It was no wonder that the people considered Jesus to be the promised prophet. But the authorities were concerned that he worked the miracle on a Sabbath day. However, for the people he became a man of wonder and his fame spread all over Galilee. Mark tells us that demons came to know about him and were silenced. The people saw his miracle and had their admiration of Jesus.

On this Sabbath day Jesus was probably invited by the local rabbi to address the people who had come to pray in the Synagogue. In the synagogue, anyone could be invited to come forward and preach. Perhaps Jesus already had a name as a speaker. In any case, as soon as he opened his mouth the people felt immediately that here was someone who was different. Unlike the Scribes and the Pharisees he did not quote others to prove his words. He laid down the law in his teaching based on his own authority. The teachings of Jesus were manifested in his actions. Through these actions Mark aims to reveal the identity of Jesus. He rebuked the evil spirit sharply just as he did at the calming of the stormy sea and now in the Synagogue the demon came out of the person with a loud cry. Jesus demanded silence from the demon and this way Mark deepens the mystery about Jesus which will be gradually revealed. Mark explains that the onlookers were amazed not because of the miraculous healing but because of his teaching. He is presented in the Gospel as one who speaks for God, a true prophet. In every miracle that he worked Jesus avoided publicity. He did it for the sake of God and not to get any honour. When they wanted to make him a king he ran away. He told people not to search for honour but to be servants of all. His miracles and healings were a service of a unique type. He came, above all, to make people free, so that in their freedom, they could generate all the productive and growth energies within them and be alive with the life of God. He freed them from all the 'evil spirits' of fear, compulsions, narrow self-centeredness, anger, resentment, hostility and violence which prevent people from truly enjoying the experience of being alive.

Summarizing today's Scripture Readings, in Jesus, we have seen the fulfilment of God's promise to send a prophet like Moses. Through St. Paul who was inspired by the Holy Spirit, tells us that God wants us to be free of anxieties in our calling, especially those who are married. Through Jesus, we have heard of his authority that reaches far beyond miraculous manifestations in this world. We are all amazed at God's love for us and he invites us to respond to his generous love. His preaching is

a personal testimony of his intimate relationship with God his Father. In his teaching Jesus was able to discover the positive value that the law seeks to protect whereas the scribes busied themselves with words and their minute applications of the law. For instance Jesus teaches that the Sabbath is a day we keep away from our work in order to serve God and do God's work. Further, his teachings were always intended to bring about a positive change in the hearts of people. For this reason Jesus performed healing miracles together with his teaching, to show that his primary concern is to change the human person physically and spiritually. As we reflect this week upon this spiritual knowledge and understanding of the Word of God, let us remember the calling that each one of us has received as children of God through the Sacrament of Baptism. Let us answer that calling by living our vocations without anxieties, placing our faith, hope and trust in Jesus who has all authority as the only begotten Son of God. So, let us all pray today that Jesus, with his growth-inducing authority will be a real source of liberation for us. May he free us from all those spirits which make us deaf, dumb, blind and lame in life and paralyzed by fear.

During the Korean War in the 1950's, people were hiding in a church and it was bombed over a few days. There was a beautiful statue of Jesus in the church which needed much protection and the American soldiers started to dig around the pedestal to have it taken away to a safer place. Suddenly a shell hit the area and all went under cover. Once the smoke was cleared they were all shocked to see the ruins. The statue was broken to pieces and bits were all spread over. The soldiers helped the priest to gather all pieces and reconstruct the statue with the special glue they could find. They did rebuild the statue except for the hands. They could not find them. Someone in the group offered to make a mould and prepare new hands. The priest told them to leave it alone. The statue would present their mission. Hence statue stood in front of the church without hands but below the statue were the words in gold letters: "I have no hands. Lend me yours."

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