

Welcome to our Eucharistic Celebration



## The Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 28, 2018

St. Mary of the Assumption Parish

### Today's Themes in Scripture

When God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses, the people were terrified by the accompanying signs of God's power and majesty. They feared that they would die if they came in close contact with God. They begged Moses to speak with God for them. God honored that request. Moses became their prophet; he brought God's word to them. When the Israelites were about to enter Canaan, Moses gave them extensive instructions for their life ahead. In today's First Reading, Moses assured the people that when he was no longer with them, God would raise up another prophet to speak for him, just as Moses had done for them. Moses told the people how God chose his prophets, about their obligation to listen to those commanded to speak for God, and the consequence of taking the role of prophet on oneself. Although the people would forget Moses' words and would "harden their hearts" against those who spoke for God, God continued to reveal himself through his prophets, who challenged the people to hear God's word and turn to him.

In the first chapter of his Gospel, Mark continues to introduce Jesus. So far, Jesus has been heralded by John the Baptist as the one whose mission will be to baptize people with the Holy Spirit. At his baptism, Jesus was affirmed to be God's beloved Son. After being tested in the desert, Jesus began his ministry. With his newly-chosen disciples, Jesus immediately began to teach in the synagogues. Teaching in the synagogue was the shared obligation of adult Jewish men, but Mark described Jesus' teaching as extraordinary. The people were shocked by Jesus' teaching, since he spoke as one who knew God, not as someone who spoke about God. His words carried an authority not seen in the religious leaders of his day. The superiority of Jesus' teaching, along with the power he displayed in freeing those with unclean spirits, commanded attention, and his reputation spread everywhere.

Richard Rohr says that "in Jesus, God was given a face and a heart." Like Moses, Jesus is a prophet and intermediary between God and each human person. He speaks the words of God as one who is in intimate communion with God. His words convey a power and authority beyond mere teaching. Because Jesus is God with a human face, people can approach him without fearing the power of God. When people saw his power in action - as in today's Gospel when Jesus healed a man troubled by an unclean spirit - they came face to face with the heart and intention of God, who desires to love people into wholeness and invite them into a relationship with him. In Jesus, one can draw close to God, hear his word, experience the healing power of his love, and find nothing to fear.

### Sunday Readings and Backgrounds

#### Reading I: Deuteronomy 18:15-20

**I will put my words into your mouth.**

- In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses conveys God's word to the people.
- The promise of God delivered by Moses is that God will raise up another prophet.
- The true prophet will deliver God's word.

#### Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 95: 1-2, 6-7, 7-9

**If today you hear his voice, harden not your heart.**

#### Reading II: 1 Corinthians 7:32-35

**I want you to be free of all worries.**

- Some of the early Christian communities found Paul to be a true prophet.
- The Christians at Corinth apparently wrote to Paul, asking him a series of practical questions about how to live the Christian life.
- The First Letter to the Corinthians is Paul's answer to their questions.

#### Gospel: Mark 1:21-28

**He has authority over all creation.**

- The Gospels reveal Jesus to be the true prophet, the one who not only brings the word of God but who is the Word of God.
- In the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark, there are several stories illustrating Jesus' authority.
- Today's passage tells of Jesus casting out a demon. The people are amazed because the demon obeys Jesus.

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# The Gospel's Core Question

“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” That’s the first question put to Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. It is really the core question of the Gospel. What are we to make of the fact that Mark puts that question in the mouth of an unclean spirit? To make matters worse, the demon got everything right by calling Jesus the Holy One of God and accusing him of having come to destroy evil spirits.

How did all of this strike the astute people of God in the synagogue? Mark tells us they were amazed and asked each other, “What is this?” Why was it so easy for Jesus’ enemies and so hard for potential disciples to understand who Jesus was and what he was about?

Perhaps it’s the difference between our reactions when we are in danger or asked for a commitment. The defeated unclean spirit who spoke for the demon world knew the jig was up. The Holy One of God was stronger than all the demons. Everything about Jesus made it clear that it was only a matter of time before divine love would reveal their utter impotence. Meanwhile, the ordinary people who were not threatened stood around with their jaws dropping. It was too soon to make up their minds; they weren’t ready to make a commitment for or against Jesus.

Although the demons perceived clearly that Jesus was their conqueror, Mark doesn’t make that the centerpiece of this incident. It takes a while for human beings to get the picture, so Mark presents Jesus as a teacher with a brand new pedagogy. Jesus called people to hope for the kingdom of God, and then he showed them exactly what it looked like. His method was enticing rather than overpowering. His was all about freeing people.

As the folks were trying to get a handle on who Jesus was, they compared him to their religious leaders. The scribes were the official teachers of the day, the ones who had studied and interpreted the meaning of the Scriptures. They were religious professionals. Jesus simply professed faith — in word and deed.

Jesus astounded the people because he didn’t just talk about the law, he made God’s love tangible. There’s no other explanation for why some people simply dropped everything to follow him. Jesus’ “authority” came through in his actions. Therefore, his appearance on the scene — on any scene — raised the same question: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?”

Each of us must answer that question — probably more than once in our lives. Today’s responsorial psalm has us challenge ourselves four times over: “If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.” While those gawking bystanders in the synagogue didn’t make any commitments after seeing and hearing Jesus, they did allow themselves to be curious. That was a necessary first step. They were letting their hearts be vulnerable. In the encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* (“The Joy of the Gospel”), Pope Francis says: “The great danger in today’s world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is ... a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience” (#2). Francis quotes Pope Paul VI and says “our “technological society has succeeded in multiplying occasions of pleasure, yet has found it very difficult to engender joy” (#7). When Jesus showed people what the kingdom of God felt like he was whetting their appetite for joy.

Mark wrote his Gospel to instruct us about the Teacher. He knew that even those disciples who left everything behind had a long road ahead of them before they would understand just what it was that Jesus of Nazareth would do with them. Perhaps the challenge of today is not so much to make a new commitment, but to let our hearts be shaken. Rereading the Gospel of Mark, we are invited to look again at Jesus the Teacher who put every word of his preaching into action. We are invited to remember the moments when we felt his invitation and wanted to give him our all. Francis’ words call us to ask what might be dulling our hearts, drugging us into a complacency that accepts pleasure instead of seeking joy.

We’ve already heard the answer to the demon’s frightened “What have you to do with us?” It is the only thing we have heard Jesus teach up to this point in Mark’s Gospel. He’s making us an offer and we must choose to accept or refuse: “The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel!”

Written by Sister Mary McGlone.  
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Celebration Publications. January, 2018.