

Sunday, January 28, 2018
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B)
Deuteronomy 18.15-20; 1 Corinthians 8.1-13; Mark 1.21-28
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The primary question we ask in the season after the Epiphany is: how God is revealed to us? How is God revealed to us specifically in the person of Jesus Christ? But thanks to the wisdom of the framers of our lectionary, we also gain insight into how God is revealed in a broader sense. How does God, throughout time, reveal himself? How does God – how will God – reveal himself to us?

Today, all of our readings look at a particular aspect of God’s revelation throughout time and to us. Specifically, how God reveals – and confers – God’s authority.

We start some 3,200 years ago, as the people of Israel wait to enter the Promised Land. Moses, who until now, has led the people through the wilderness on their 40-year journey, addresses the people. Until now, Moses has been the means by which God has spoken to his people. It was Moses who provided the people with the word of God through the giving of the Law. At this pivotal time in the life of the people, Moses reminds them of what they have learned over the past 40 years. He reminds them of all the laws God has given them. He reminds the people of their covenant with God. Even though he will not be the one to lead them into the Promised Land, he assures them the covenant is still in force. That God promises to be with his people if they remain faithful to that covenant. And Moses assures them that God will continue to guide them through prophets who will proclaim the divine word.

Throughout history, particularly in the age of the new covenant, in the Christian era, some scholars have debated the meaning of Moses’ words – of God’s promise to “raise up . . . a prophet . . . from their own people” (Deut 18.18a). A debate as to whether this promise referred to the prophetic office that would be exercised by a whole series of God’s prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Elijah, and others; or a particular prophet. Regardless of the intent, in the Christian era we understand this promise to ultimately be fulfilled in Jesus Christ. For no prophet since this promise was made has spoken with the level of authority that we recognize in Christ as the Son of God. In this passage, Christians see Jesus as the divine prophet for whom the people await. For whom we await.

This is the Old Testament revelation of God’s authority as exemplified in the covenant with the people of Israel. And how we Christians are able to look back and see that covenant and God’s promises as pointing to a new covenant. A new covenant in which God is revealed through Jesus Christ. A new covenant which, in part, reveals God’s authority in and through his Son. A new covenant that is fully revealed and explained in the New Testament.

In the Gospel reading from Mark, we hear today the first public manifestation of this new covenant. (At least, as Mark tells the story.) The scene we hear today is the very beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. Occurring shortly after Jesus’ baptism, in which he is revealed as God’s Son, the Beloved, with whom God is well pleased, today’s scene is the first public revelation of

what that means. Today's scene is the beginning of Jesus living into the fullness of his revelation as the Son of God. With all the authority that entails.

Jesus is teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. Itself, not an unusual event. It was not uncommon for visiting rabbis to be given the honor of teaching on the scripture of the day. We don't know what that particular passage was, nor do we even know what he said about it. But we are told that those present "were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (Mk 1.22). Scribes and others who would have taught in such a situation would have relied upon the knowledge and understanding of the scriptures as conveyed by those who went before them. But what Jesus teaches is different. While the scribes taught with human authority, Jesus spoke with divine authority in a way that was clearly recognized by all.

But Jesus does not just teach with authority. He goes on to demonstrate his authority in tangible ways. He is confronted by a man with an unclean spirit. A spirit that is the antithesis of what Jesus is about. A spirit that is certainly not divine in origin. Jesus uses his divine authority to cast out the unclean spirit. Jesus casts out powerful forces that by all appearances are directed against him, thereby attesting to the power and authority conferred upon Jesus by God.

It is important to remember that Jesus' authority – the authority given directly by God – would later be transmitted to the apostles. Mark tells us in a later passage that Jesus "appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons" (Mk 3.14-15). Jesus does not keep this divine authority to himself. He confers it upon his followers. To the apostles. And to us, who are inheritors of their legacy. Jesus shares his ministry with them and with us. To show us what it means to truly be his followers. Because we are, after all, made in the image and likeness of God. As his followers, we are called to live into that image and likeness.

Of course, when I say that we have the authority of God conferred upon us, I'm not saying that we have all the powers of God. Or of Christ, for that matter. I use the conferral of "the authority of God" as shorthand for us being called and commissioned to speak and act on behalf of God. Not unlike the prophets of old. That we, as members of the Body of Christ, have the authority to speak and act in accordance with God's will. In accordance with what is of importance to God. To proclaim God's love, mercy, and grace in and through our words and actions.

The ramifications of Jesus conferring his authority – God's authority – upon us is more fully explained in today's reading from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. This is a somewhat cryptic passage that holds significant meaning for us as the followers of Jesus and as the inheritors of his divine authority. In this passage, Paul talks about varying positions on eating food sacrificed to idols. It helps to understand that in Corinth at the time of Paul's writing, nearly all meat available in the markets had previously been offered as sacrifices to pagan gods and goddesses. Today's passage clearly indicates that the Corinthian church included believers who maintained that our God is the only God, and therefore, no other deities exist. That being the case, food items offered to such non-existent gods – to meaningless idols – was simply another source of food, and therefore available for human consumption. No harm, no foul.

However, there were other members of the community who believed that such sacrificed foods had been religiously contaminated – made unclean – by being offered to idols, to non-Christian gods, and therefore must be avoided. This was one of the great debates in the Corinthian church which Paul seeks to address.

In his letter to them, Paul does not seek to establish any particular law regarding the matter. Recognizing the sensitivity of the issue, and the passion on both sides of the debate, he instead seeks a pastoral response. He calls the community not to try to change the minds of those on the other side, but instead to be respectful of the competing positions. He calls the members of the community to show concern for one another. If eating sacrificed meat would be scandalous to those in their presence, if eating such meat would cause a sister or brother in Christ to stumble in their faith, don't do it. At least not publically. (Presumably doing so in the privacy of one's own home would be okay.)

While this practice of selling sacrificed meat in the store doesn't happen today and therefore doesn't concern us, Paul's bottom-line message applies nonetheless. What is really at issue is care for the spiritual wellbeing of other members of the community. That Christians have a responsibility to each other that their behavior does not cause a sister or brother to stumble in their faith, to sin. Ultimately, it is love that binds the community together. Concern for others and maintaining the unity of the community take priority over individual beliefs and preferences. What matters is not individual knowledge and understanding, but behaviors based in Christian love. In short, Paul is stating that God's authority is revealed through love, through acts of love, as opposed to one's position on particular issues. That as inheritors of the authority of God, we are to use that authority in love, we are to live into that authority through acts of love.

After this service, we will conduct our Parish Annual Meeting. There are certain things that must happen at that meeting. Only a couple, really. We are required to elect new members of the Vestry and to elect delegates for Diocesan Convention. And while not required, we feel a fiduciary responsibility to present the finances for the previous year and the budget for the current year. That's really it. But our Annual Meeting is more than just a couple of elections and a disclosure of our finances. Our Annual Meeting is really a celebration of our life together as a Parish. It is really a celebration of our own authority to proclaim the word of God through our own witness and example. We do this by reporting on the ways we have accomplished our mission and ministry in the previous year. By celebrating those accomplishments. And where appropriate, by looking ahead to where God is calling us to go, who God is calling us to be, and what God is calling us to do.

We proclaim the authority of God through our ministries. We proclaim the authority of God in word through our liturgy and music, preaching, and teaching. We proclaim the authority of God in action through our internal ministries to our fellow members of this Parish. Through our works of pastoral care and parish life activities. Through our outreach ministries, whereby we demonstrate the Gospel and the authority of God through care of our brothers and sisters outside our walls. Through our Food Bank and Feed My Lambs. Through the various outreach activities we engage in throughout the year. Providing tangible benefits to those for whom God has particular preference – the poor, the homeless, the widowed, the orphaned. And through

our acts of hospitality – serving our own members as well as those who are strangers, who are visiting, who are seeking God through word, action, and relationship.

Our Annual Meeting actually doesn't start at the end of this service. In actuality, it began at 9:00, when we gathered together – those who normally attend the 8:00 worship and those who regularly attend the 10:15 – to worship as one faith community. As we celebrate our faith tradition, in which the authority of God has been conveyed through prophets of old; through the life and ministry, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; through our own words and actions; through our own witness and ministry as the people of St. Gregory's Episcopal Church.

We stand in a long line of those to whom the authority of God is revealed; upon whom the authority of God is conferred by Jesus Christ himself. We are called to embrace that authority and exercise it to the fullest. That's the real reason we have Annual Meetings. To remember that we are inheritors of God's authority. To be reminded of what that authority means. To discern how we might continually proclaim that authority in word and action. And to be challenged – as individuals and as a parish family – to live more fully into the authority that God through Christ has entrusted to each and every one of us.