

Sunday, January 31, 2021

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B)

Deuteronomy 18.15-20; 1 Corinthians 8.1-13; Mark 1.21-28

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1661051664066853>

(Sermon begins at about 14:15)

“With Authority”

In recent weeks and months, we have become all too familiar with the precarious relationship we have with the concept of authority. And we have become increasingly aware that the recognition of authority—of rightful, duly conferred authority—can be a touchy thing. Particularly in a system that confers authority based on the will of the majority. And even more so on a system where the definition of that majority is open to interpretation. Leading to struggles over authority. We’ve just lived through one of the most contentious elections in our nation’s history, which saw—and still sees—fighting over acknowledgment of who has legitimate authority to lead this nation for the next four years. A fight that was so contentious it resulted in the only instance of our fellow citizens seeking to forcibly take control of the federal government. An act which has far-reaching implications as our government considers actions that will minimize the likelihood of such events in the future. Or, at least, that is the hope. But what about when we have no direct say in who has authority?

I suppose we have a love-hate relationship with authority. We love it when the holder of authority has views consistent with our own or exercises that authority in a way that we agree with. But we hate it when the holder of authority has views counter to our own or exercises that authority in ways that we disagree with. This is nothing new. Throughout our history, we have struggled with our relationship with authority, seeking the perfect system to establish and exercise authority. And the church is no different. We see that in today’s scripture readings, all of which are about authority in some form or another. I’d like to look at what these readings have to say about authority and how it applies to us. Not so much in terms of our national politics, but in terms of our day-to-day lives as Christians. I will do this by taking the readings in chronological order. Not chronological in the order presented in this service, but chronological in terms of when the events occurred, or the books written.

Our Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy is a portion of Moses’ final speech to the people of Israel before they enter the Promised Land. God has told Moses his job is done, and he will not be entering the Promised Land with those whom he has led for the past 40 years. In his farewell speech, he covers a lot of ground, essentially reminding the people of what they have learned over the last 40 years. The part we hear today touches on the subject of authority. The people undoubtedly have questions about who will lead them into the Promised Land. Who is really in charge? Moses puts that question to rest when he tells the people, “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet” (Deut 18.15). Moses doesn’t name a specific person, but makes it clear that God will appoint a prophet. Someone who will speak on behalf of God. The unspoken message rings loud and clear. The one who is in charge, who has authority? God. It’s not about who holds the

title of prophet. It's about the fact that the prophet is appointed by God and is charged with conveying God's commands to the people. And that the people, in return, are to respect the prophet's authority and heed what is said because it is ultimately from God.

Moving on chronologically we come to the Gospel According to Mark. What we hear today is still very early in Jesus' public ministry. Thus far, he has only called four of the twelve disciples. In fact, in Mark's Gospel, this is Jesus' first recorded acts of ministry, in which he teaches in a synagogue in Capernaum. While teaching the assembled congregation, he is confronted by a man with an unclean spirit, a demon. It is this encounter which reveals something about Jesus' authority to be doing what he is doing.

Jesus' authority is most obviously revealed in the words of the demon: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God" (Mk 1.24). This could be a challenge on the part of the demon. It is certainly "evidence of the cosmic world's full recognition of Jesus' authority, an authority which in the human world is continually challenged,"¹ as we see throughout Jesus' ministry. Even if humans don't always recognize it, the powers of darkness, those working against God, recognize that Jesus derives his authority from God himself. Of course, as Christians, we recognize that. But at this point in Jesus' life and ministry, what he was about was still pretty much unknown, still being revealed. The fact that the demons recognized immediately who he was and even more willingly acknowledged his authority—even his authority over them—is telling.

Jesus' authority is further manifest—or at least, confirmed—when Jesus "rebuked [the spirit], saying 'Be silent, and come out of him!'" and the spirit left the man (Mk 1.25-26). This was proof that Jesus did indeed have Divine authority if he was able to cast out a demon so easily. Upon seeing this display of authority, the assembled crowd was able to recognize for themselves that Jesus carried Divine authority. Their response is kind of interesting: "They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority!'" (Mk 1.27). This response is interesting because they are connecting Jesus' act of teaching with this act of casting out the unclean spirit. We don't know what he was teaching when he was so rudely interrupted by the man with the unclean spirit. Whatever it was, the exorcism, the act of healing the man, apparently illustrated or somehow further confirmed what Jesus was teaching.

We can guess, given other clues in the first chapter of Mark, that Jesus was probably teaching about salvation. How the people of God could be saved. The concept of salvation has its roots, linguistically speaking, in words used for healing. Salvation is healing in its ultimate sense. And in the act of casting out the demon, Jesus illustrated this point. The man was brought back to health in a physical sense. And his soul was saved. Healing, salvation, on multiple levels, lending credibility and authority to the message that Jesus was preaching. Lending credibility and authority to Jesus himself. In this, Jesus' authority is most clearly demonstrated not in the words of the demon, not in the words of his teaching, but in his actions of casting out the demon. What is it they say? Actions speak louder than words?

And then we come to our Epistle reading from First Corinthians. While this reading does not specifically use the word authority, it is strongly implied. In the passage we hear today, Paul is

talking about the practice of eating food sacrificed to idols, and how that is to be understood. We know that food was sacrificed to the Roman gods. The sacrificed food did not go to waste. It was then sold in the markets. The question for Christians was whether it was okay to eat food sacrificed to pagan idols. Paul essentially argues that since the idols are just that, idols, and therefore not true gods, it's okay to eat sacrificed food. But he also notes that doing so could be scandalous to some who may not have as mature an understanding of faith. In which case, one needs to use discretion in dealing with such persons, so as not to "become a stumbling block to the weak" (1 Cor 8.9).

While the presenting issue may be eating sacrificed foods, Paul is really speaking of a broader, deeper, issue of living our faith and being firm in our faith. That as Christians we need to have an understanding of what is truly important, what is central, to our life of faith. And what is not. As Paul puts it, the core essentials are "for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Cor 8.6). But even though we share these and associated core essentials, we don't all have the same understanding or interpretation. We don't all live our faith the same way. And that's okay. But we need to recognize that how we live our lives of faith are a model and example to others. Even to our fellow Christians. So, we are to be cautious in how we choose to express our faith. We should do so in ways that build up the faith of others, not cause them to question their own faith or to stumble.

While Paul does not specifically use the term, it all boils down to our relationships with one another as the Body of Christ. That we are to be concerned about our fellow Christians and how our actions, how the way we live our lives of faith, influence others in their lives of faith. It ultimately boils down to providing mutual support in our lives of faith, as well as providing accountability in our communal life.

Bringing the core messages from all three of our readings together, we know that God is in charge. That God has given Jesus authority for our care and wellbeing—for our health and salvation. And that, as the Body of Christ, we share in the responsibility for the care and wellbeing of one another. That our authority to do so comes through our baptisms, whereby we are brought into the Body of Christ. That we exercise that authority in how we chose to live our lives of faith. And even more so, we exercise that authority through our relationships with one another. In how we deal with one another—supporting one another in our lives of faith and in our ministries, and holding one another accountable in Christian love.

One of the many ways we do this is through our annual parish meeting, which we will hold after this worship service. While something that is required by our parish bylaws and the canons of the church to fulfill specific functions such as electing of members to Vestry and delegates to Diocesan Convention, the annual meeting has a more important, although unwritten, purpose. It is one of the means by which we recognize and celebrate the fact that we are the Body of Christ in this place and as such, that we are given authority to do ministry in this place. And through the various ministry reports we generate every year, we first seek to celebrate the ministries we do, while also seeking to hold one another accountable for the work that we do in proclaiming the Gospel of Christ in word and action. Sacred work that is done under the

authority conferred to us by our Lord Jesus Christ. Sacred work that is confirmed and supported by our mutual love for one another and those we minister to.

¹ *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1807.