

Sermon: Year B, IV Epiphany  
Texts: Deuteronomy 18:15-20  
I Corinthians 8:1-13  
Mark 1:21-28

We are experiencing now a most interesting moment in history, which, according to the popular Chinese proverb, is probably neither good nor will it be enjoyable. For we are watching an entire class of experts, whom we have depended on, falter and retreat. The news is all about the economy, which only a few short years ago we had thought we had largely figured out. This was the popular conceit: we knew the system, and we knew that it always works, and it always advances, offering handsome and reliable rewards to those who follow true. We just had to learn how to tune our own lives to its unerring wisdom.

But now that tune has changed. No one seems as sure as they used to be, not even among the vaunted ranks of highly paid professionals. Part of the problem is that we really can't figure out the extent of the problem. We are afraid to look, afraid to tell, afraid to admit just how deep the hole we have dug for ourselves is. And all the more, even the best and the brightest don't seem to know how to clearly determine what has been lost and what remains and for whom. It's easy to hear the echo of Saint Paul: "knowledge puffs up." And with alarming quickness, all the grand towers of expertise that we've proudly constructed can collapse. Where will we be six months from now or a year? The only honest answer that returns as a chorus is this: "Who knows." All our certainty has been humbled. Speculation, a poor cousin, has become the order of the day.

Under such conditions, what we hope will emerge from out of the fog of ambiguity and anxiety is a voice of authority – which is really deeper than knowledge. Systems and theories have become suspect again. They're too abstract and complex. What we want, more than a cascade of new proposals, is to find someone we can trust, whose bearing, integrity, and composure assures us, whose authority is not tied to expertise, but to something much more intimate, more integral and plainly grounded. We all want to hear a compelling voice say, "Follow me."

This is what we have heard this morning from Mark's Gospel, an account of the first public act of Jesus' ministry. Jesus entered a synagogue in Capernaum and read the Scriptures to the people. As Mark records it, they were astounded. They were astounded because Jesus spoke with authority. We should put some weight on that particular response. Mark didn't declare that the people were pleased to be better informed or felt surprisingly enlightened. We have no idea what Jesus actually said. Nor did the people claim that, suddenly, here was a larger than life celebrity who dazzled them: he had found a way to make their dried up old texts and rituals contemporary and fresh and cool. No. Mark wants us to simply contemplate what the austerity of his report means. Jesus had astounded them, because he spoke with authority, and everybody listened – even the evil spirits.

This is all we are told – an incredibly succinct account, which is in keeping with the whole of Mark's Gospel. It's noteworthy that Mark recorded very little of Jesus' teaching. There's no Sermon on the Mount. There are only a few parables. There are no long debates with the Pharisees concerning the fine points of the Judaic Law. Jesus gives very little advice on how to live. He isn't a wise spiritual mentor, dispensing delicate bits of insight. All such instruction is

secondary at best. What's primary, according to Mark, is that Jesus is a figure of unwavering obedience and conviction. Never double-minded, he moves from town to town with the singular intent of showing the *desire* of God, which is that the defeat of evil itself will be accomplished no matter the cost. If you have an eye for it, it's remarkable how little Mark speaks of our human travails, illnesses, common troubles, the things that we work so hard to treat and heal and resolve. And in comparison, it's equally impressive how often he speaks of the demonic, that intangible, restless darkness that has no answer, that can't be fixed but can only be overcome, overwhelmed by a more stubborn passion and commitment.

This is what astounded all those around him. Jesus didn't try to deliver a message. They weren't amazed because he was eloquent about faith or particularly well-versed in Scripture. What struck them was that Jesus revealed the very presence of God. About this, Mark is explicit. The people were bewildered at what they saw in Jesus, but the demons, all that is bent toward chaos and destruction, recognized him clearly. They realized that in him God was addressing not just the particular ills of the world – this problem and that dilemma. Jesus was addressing the fundamental divide of sin itself. This is why the spirits cried out. On that day, Jesus didn't just perform an individual miracle, fixing the problem of an unfortunate man. He was announcing the arrival of God's full grace and mercy, which redeems all things and banishes evil. This was his authority.

The fundamental proclamation of Christianity is that evil is not a problem to be solved, worked out by thinking it through and unraveling the knot. Evil is not a confusion, and no amount of expertise will eliminate it. It's beyond knowledge and beyond thought. And thus, it must be conquered by God himself and God alone, who, though he could have summarily driven it out, chose instead to suffer it completely, in order to vanquish evil's consummate work, death, by a more resilient commitment to life. This is the testimony of Mark's Gospel, displayed in the person of Jesus – not knowledge or wisdom or understanding but something more essential, more demanding, and infinitely more sublime. Not knowledge that puffs up, but love that builds up.

This was the authority that Jesus had, and this was the power that astonished the people – evident in a life turned not toward solutions but, with unshakeable confidence, turned in every way toward God. And as Mark noted at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, he reiterated at the very end. When Jesus died, finally, in this last act of supreme love, suffering execution on the cross, a Roman centurion recognized and publicly declared what the demons had attested all along. "Truly," he said, "this man was the Son of God." Authority was made manifest not by power nor by any of the things in life of which we can boast: wealth, reputation, extravagance, expertise. Ultimately, none of these endure. Only love abides. This is where true authority resides.

Part of the human predicament is that we spend our lives measuring ourselves, and we have a huge list of standards: looks, popularity, the impressiveness of diplomas and resumes, accomplishments, acquisitions. How often, however, do you frame up your life by the measure of true authority, the measure of the degree to which you have lived and shown love? I sometimes marvel when I listen to conversations at funeral receptions. Someone has just been buried, but often the talk is only about frivolous things: schedules, interests, hobbies, the

weather, the food on the tables – the surface matters of life, which are pleasant enough but astound no one. As soon as a life has been remembered, it is forgotten – regardless of measure.

And then, every once in a while, someone dies, and after their burial the talk does not turn immediately to all the sundry things of the moment. People speak instead about how someone who is physically gone is still spiritually very present to them. There's a directness and focus to what is said, with less meandering. This life was important. It had weight. This person exuded the best of authority. By objective standards, there may have been nothing big about this person – no headlines, no bling, no vast network of great influence. What made the difference is that she loved much and loved deeply and chose to use her time to make manifest the heart of life and the passion of God. Everything else falls away. But this, astoundingly, remains.

We are living in interesting times, when many are listening for a voice to follow. It's an opportune time for us, as Christians, to speak with authority – not just in words but in love shown and in lives that, following Jesus, may be remembered for being thoroughly sacramental, formed in trust, lived with joy and generosity, directed toward redemption, and confident in resurrection. This is the finest possibility that lies before us: love, the one true authority.

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