

Readings for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

28th January 2024

First Reading: Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Moses spoke to the people; he said: The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: 'If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.' Then the LORD replied to me: 'They are right in what they have said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak – that prophet shall die.'

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that 'all of us possess knowledge.' Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him.

Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that 'no idol in the world really exists,' and that 'there is no God but one.' Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth – as in fact there are many gods and many lords – yet 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.

It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. 'Food will not bring us close to God.' We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling-block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

Gospel: St Mark 1:21-28

The disciples went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, '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.' But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching – with authority!

He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.’ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

A Reflection for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Who do you trust? And thinking of those people or institutions, do you trust them instinctively or by intentional choice?

I have a perception, from the media and social media that I consume, that there has been an erosion of trust in public bodies in recent years. Certainly, it is possible to find articles that suggest as much from organisations I would consider trustworthy and reasonably free of bias. But, when I decided to dig a bit deeper, I found that the picture is not quite so clear cut. Other articles, from similarly reputable (to my mind) sources, suggest that, while trust of individuals is generally high, when it comes to public bodies it depends on which ones you are considering when addressing the issue of trust. A 2022 OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) survey reported that 35% of people in Britain trust the government; other reports give a lower figure, but also point out that this level of trust hasn't changed a great deal for decades, we've just never trusted governments that much! The OECD survey indicated that trust in some other public bodies is higher – around 80% for the NHS and 68% for the justice system for example. But the waters of trust are further muddied by the idea of conspiracy theories, something we hear quite a lot about. Are they really that new or is this just a result of the increased availability of information? For institutions, and I include the church here, trust is something that can be hard to earn, and harder to regain if it is lost.

One thing that is clear is that we need to stop and think, to use our judgment when we decide to who to trust and what information to believe. One of the criticisms levelled at the Post Office in the Horizon scandal has been that no-one appears to have stopped to consider the (un)likelihood of hundreds or thousands of sub-postmasters and mistresses all going rogue at the same time. There is a place for what we might call 'gut feeling' in trust, the idea that if something doesn't feel right it probably isn't, but generally we need to try to back that up with something more substantial.

In today's Gospel reading, we hear of Jesus teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum where he was recognised as 'one having authority'. 'Authority' is a word we might associate with trust, or power, or right, or knowledge, in different contexts. My dictionary gives two slightly different definitions for the idea of having authority: either to have the power or right to enforce obedience; or to have influence because of recognised knowledge or expertise.

In the context of Jesus' teaching, I instinctively incline to the second of these definitions, that Jesus' teaching was influential, based on knowledge or expertise, but it's not that straightforward. Jesus' teaching is compared unfavourably with that of the scribes on this very point of authority: 'he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes'. And yet the scribes would have been very well trained and have had extensive knowledge of the scriptures and associated texts and teachings. Although we are not told what he said, or even the subject on which he spoke, Jesus' teaching was somehow different - different enough to be commented on, to cause astonishment.

Knowledge on its own is not enough to command authority. Further on in the Gospel passage, even the demon had knowledge, the demon knew who Jesus was and is. Knowledge is certainly useful and usually preferable to the

opposite – ignorance. It may be said that ignorance is bliss, but ignorance has, often unintentionally, lead to a great deal of suffering. But knowledge in its own right is not sufficient to counteract that.

As Paul describes, in the passage from his first letter to the Corinthians, it is not enough to simply have the right knowledge, to have the correct theology on a topic, in his example, food sacrificed to idols, but any other ethical issue will do. There is a problem if we exercise our rights, even if those rights entail doing the 'right' thing if, at the same time, we overlook the rights and needs of others. As he reminds us, true wisdom is less about knowledge and information and primarily about loving as God loves.

To return to the synagogue at Capernaum, both Jesus and the scribes had knowledge, but Jesus taught with authority because he was inspired and empowered by God, because he was the living embodiment of God's love. He was totally authentic in a way that is not possible for ordinary mortals to be, and his teaching flowed from that. His authoritative teaching is a fulfilment of God's promise in Deuteronomy to send a prophet like Moses, one who knows God face to face, one who speaks the words of God to the people with divine authority.

The account then moves on to the healing of the man with the unclean spirit, the first miracle recorded in Mark's Gospel, and again his authority is commented on. This time, it is more representative of the first of the definitions I gave earlier: to have the power or right to enforce obedience. Here, Jesus demonstrates his power to act decisively against the forces of evil and simply commands the spirit to come out of the man. He has that authority. He doesn't need to invoke the assistance of anyone else, he is God. And he doesn't resort to violence either, despite the violent effect of the spirit on the man. Once again, the people are amazed.

But amazement is not faith, and the people's continuing lack of faith, despite the amazing things they witness, is a theme throughout Mark's Gospel. This is in contrast to the demons who, as here, recognise exactly who Jesus is: the 'Holy One of God'.

We live in a vastly different time to the ancient world where illness was thought to be the work of demons, but the reality of evil in the world remains all too clear. We see the evils of war, terrorism, injustice, poverty, environmental destruction all around us, evils that devalue and destroy human life and all of God's creation.

In today's Gospel, we see Jesus' authority over evil as he commands the spirit to leave. In the following chapter, the Gospel shows Jesus' authority to forgive sins as he heals the paralysed man. Two chapters later, Jesus' authority over natural forces is demonstrated as he calms the storm. These are epiphanies, for this season of Epiphany, moments of revelation that gradually open our eyes to who Jesus is. They establish Jesus' credentials as the one we can trust in all circumstances, the one with authority in all sense of that word. He is the one in whom we can put our faith as he calls us, too, to move beyond amazement and to follow him.