

# A Look Behind the Scriptures

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time—Cycle B—January 29, 2012



## READING1 Deuteronomy 18:15-20

The institution of prophecy tells us much about God's relationship with the chosen people. A sure sign of love in any relationship is communication- the initiative to open one's mind and heart to another. Through the prophets, God was in constant communication with the people-encouraging, warning comforting. A later chapter of Deuteronomy (34; 10) says "Since then no prophet has arisen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face". Moses could handle that kind of intimacy, but apparently the people could not.

At Horeb, the Israelites has been so intimidated by the Divine Presence manifested in fire and thunder that they has actually asked God not to "speak" directly to them again, but use a human intermediary instead. Pleased, God granted the request.

Here Moses announces God's decision to send a prophet like himself whom they need not fear, for the people believed a direct encounter with God would result in death, since no mortal could survive God's Presence. But God warns that intermediaries can bring problems, for some may ignore the words the prophet speaks in God's name. If anyone shows such disrespect, God says sternly, "I myself will make him answer". But more serious is the prophet who abuses his office and speaks "an oracle that I have not commanded". God's remedy is uncompromising and blunt: that prophet "shall die".

Originally, the passage referred to the whole lone of prophets who would succeed Moses, but eventually this text was taken to refer to a final, messianic prophet. The selection of this text for today's liturgy identifies Jesus with that prophet and links the authority with which Jesus teaches to the charismatic authority demonstrated by Moses and his successors.

## Reading 2:1 Corinthians7:32-35

Paul is answering the Corinthians' questions about practical matters like marriage and sexuality. But taken out of context, this passage makes little sense and may even alienate some listeners. Paul's true intent is best seen in the first and last sentences where his time is quite pastoral. Paul wants to be helpful by offering good advice for hard times. He and his contemporaries are expecting the end of the world, so he takes a practical approach, urging the Corinthians to focus on the essentials, to simplify their lives and avoid what is unnecessary. Who could disagree that a less complicated life appears easier to live than one laden with the responsibilities of children, home, and spouse?

Paul is concerned that time is running out, so he encourages stability-maintaining their current state of life rather than embracing new situations that may heighten anxiety. The first sentence sets Paul's premise; pause, then, like a wise teacher, share Paul's advice stressing his contrasts between the commitments and constraints of the married and unmarried. This is a simple message, but he doesn't deal with it simplistically. Paul is pointing to higher things, ideal values, while remaining firmly rooted in reality. He is solicitous, fatherly and unusually flexible in his options, for he's not legislating restrictions, only offering options for how best to be ready for the Lord's return.

## GOSPEL Mark 1:21-28

It's intriguing to find an unclean spirit right in the midst of the synagogue where Jesus teaches and leaves the assembly "astonished". The people sense the authority with which he teaches, an authority that perhaps evokes memories of the great prophets of their tradition. Certainly the "spirit" knows with whom he's dealing and bluntly calls Jesus out. But his tactic serves only to demonstrate further the remarkable character of this rabbi. The exorcism also serves Mark's purpose of demonstrating the authority of Jesus, though it's not the power to so miracles that Mark wants to highlight; rather the depth and power of Jesus' teaching. Driving out the spirit simply validates the supremacy of that teaching. The miracle says: Here is one whose authority is manifest in both word and deed.

The possessed man "cries out" to Jesus. Without exaggerating, suggest the compulsion with which he speaks and the uncontrolled flow of his exclamations. The man is loud, fast, and intense, apparently on the offensive and defensive at the same time, and clearly afraid. Jesus matches his intensity, but in contrast to the possessed man, we see (reflected on your face) the "authority" that set Jesus apart from the scribes.

Narrate the exorcism as if you were watching it, conveying the terrible energy of this bizarre event. Sustaining the energy, narrate the amazement of the onlookers. Don't try for three different onlooker voices, but vary the energy, intensity and rate of the three comments. As you inform us of Jesus' growing "fame", your tone acknowledged the propriety and predictability of that notoriety.

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