

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Deuteronomy is structured in the form of three discourses, the second of which contains the laws proper. The first discourse (1:1-4:43) is an introduction to the book. It stresses what the book, and the entire Bible, is all about. It tells us that God in His providence and mercy is constantly watching over His people, over every single man and woman, as can be seen from the wonders He worked during the 40 years the Jews spent in the wilderness. Most important of all, this first discourse emphasizes another basic fact: Yahweh requires strict fidelity to the covenant: this was what Israel committed itself to in Sinai, to adore the one true God.

The second discourse, from which our reading for today comes, encompasses 4:44 through chapter 28. This discourse stresses the Decalogue and that God's choice of Israel is a pure act of love on His part and that this grace must permeate the lifestyle of His Chosen People; consequently a whole series of liturgical, civil and criminal laws are given to ensure that His promises are carried out.

The third discourse (29 through the end) is a vigorous exhortation to obedience to Yahweh. Their love for Him should not be out of fear of punishment but by way of appreciation for all the gifts He has given. True wisdom consists in not exploring the hidden mysteries of God out of curiosity, but in knowing His commandments and practicing them faithfully.

To better understand today's first reading, we will start at verse 9 and continue through the reading. It is Moses who is speaking. The question at issue here is the all-important one of the vital link between the people and God. The fundamental opposition between a nature religion, the aim of which was control and leverage on the deity (such as practiced by the pagans who occupy the Promised Land), and that of the Hebrew; who is to live by obedience to God's saving word. Ecstatic prophecy was common to Israel and Canaan, but the end that it served was in each case profoundly different.

This is a key text regarding the institution of the office of prophet in Israel. Together with the king and the priest, the prophet is one of the great institutions of Israel; the prophet has a very important religious position and special moral authority. In the history of the Jewish people Moses is seen not only as the one who delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt, not only as the one who gave them God's laws, but also as the first prophet and the model for all future prophets.

The role of the prophet is to monitor the status of the people's covenantal relationship with God; to speak in the name of the Lord and proclaim the meaning and scope of past, present and future events: to remind them of the blessings and curses associated with their covenant. As Peter Kreeft says in his book *The God Who Loves You*, "Prophets are like fingers, not like faces. We are not meant to look at them but to the reality to which they point."

"When you come into the land which the LORD, your God, is giving you, you shall not learn to imitate the abominations of the peoples there. ¹⁰ Let there not be found among you anyone who immolates his son or daughter in the fire,

Immolation was a form of child sacrifice practiced by the Phoenicians who sacrificed to Molech (see Leviticus 18:21) by slaying the child and then cremating it (see Ezekiel 16:20-22; 20:26, 31; 23:37) Such human sacrifices are classed here with other pagan superstitions because they were believed to possess magical powers for averting calamity (see 2 Kings 3:27). Three other forms are also listed as we shall hear.

nor a fortune-teller, soothsayer, charmer, diviner,

Fortune telling, soothsaying and divining are forms of augury (divination).

¹¹ or caster of spells,

Charming and casting of spells is the practice of black magic.

nor one who consults ghosts and spirits or seeks oracles from the dead.

Consulting ghosts and spirits or seeking oracles from the dead is the practice of necromancy (occultism).

¹² Anyone who does such things is an abomination to the LORD, and because of such abominations the LORD, your God, is driving these nations out of your way. ¹³ You, however, must be altogether sincere toward the LORD, your God. ¹⁴ Though these nations whom you are to dispossess listen to their soothsayers and fortune-tellers, the LORD, your God, will not permit you to do so. ¹⁵ "A prophet like me will the LORD, your God, raise up for you from among your own kinsmen; to him you shall listen.

Prophecy is for Israel the great means of mediation with her God It is shown in opposition to the surrogates just mentioned. This is the prophetic office founded at Sinai (Horeb) as an office of mediation like that of Moses himself who was a unique prophet. Since Jesus is the Great Prophet in whom the prophetic office of the Old Testament finds its fulfillment, this passage was understood in a special messianic sense by the Jews (John 6:14; 7:40) and by the Apostles (Acts 3:22; 7:37).

16 This is exactly what you requested of the LORD, your God, at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, 'Let us not again hear the voice of the LORD, our God, nor see this great fire any more, lest we die.' 17 And the LORD said to me, 'This was well said. 18 I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their kinsmen, and will put my words into his mouth; he shall tell them all that I command him.

This is the only prophet promised in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible). It was to this prophet that the Samaritan woman at the well referred when she said to Jesus "you are a prophet" (John 4:19). The Samaritans had as their Sacred Writings only the Torah because they rejected the Prophets who spoke badly of them. This passage was interpreted in later Judaism as applying to an eschatological prophetic figure (see John 1:21).

19 If any man will not listen to my words which he speaks in my name, I myself will make him answer for it. 20 But if a prophet presumes to speak in my name an oracle that I have not commanded him to speak, or speaks in the name of other gods, he shall die.'

2nd Reading - 1 Corinthians 7:32-35

Last Week we heard Saint Paul begin to answer various questions which have been asked of him. The one addressed last week and again today concerns marriage and virginity. We continue with his remarks from where we left off last week.

32 I should like you to be free of anxieties. An unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord. 33 But a married man is anxious about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, 34 and he is divided. An unmarried woman or a virgin is anxious about the things of the Lord, so that she may be holy in both body and spirit. A married woman, on the other hand, is anxious about the things of the world, how she may please her husband.

Marriage involves spouses in many worldly cares that make it difficult for them to concentrate themselves perfectly and completely to the Lord's service. The married are tied by flesh and blood in many relationships that subject them to this world and can easily impede their complete dedication to God. The husband must try to please the wife, and the wife the husband. Consequently, they are "divided;" impeded from devoting their attention solely to the Lord. The virgin, being freed from the cares and duties of family life, can devote herself with undivided attention and heart to the Lord. She may be "holy" in the cultic sense of being dedicated to God, consecrated, sacred, reserved for God and His service.

"Here Paul explains why virginity is preferable to marriage. It has nothing to do with the rightness or wrongness of sex. Rather it is a question of anxieties which prevent the mind from concentrating on the worship of God." [Severian of Gabala (ca. A.D. 400), *Pauline Commentary from the Greek Church*]

³⁵ I am telling you this for your own benefit, not to impose a restraint upon you, but for the sake of propriety and adherence to the Lord without distraction.

Virginity is a better state than marriage because it is better adapted to the contemplation of God and to the apostolic life. In counseling virginity, Saint Paul does not intend to restrict the Christian's liberty to contract marriage, but only to point out what is advantageous for them, what is proper, and what enables them to devote themselves to the Lord without distraction.

“The one is bound by marriage bonds, the other is free. One is under the law, the other under grace. Marriage is good because through it the means of human continuity are found. But virginity is better, because through it are attained the inheritance of a heavenly kingdom and a continuity of heavenly rewards.” [Saint Ambrose of Milan (ca. A.D. 389), *Synodal Letters* 44]

Gospel - Mark 1:21-28

Jesus has just started His public ministry. For the past two weeks we have heard of Him going out and recruiting disciples. Now He begins to teach.

²¹ Then they came to Capernaum,

Capernaum is located on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee (Lake Gennesaret), this town was to become Jesus' home base while in Galilee.

and on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught.

Mark records much less of Jesus' doctrine than either Matthew or Luke, but he associates the activity of teaching much more closely with Jesus' self-revelation.

²² The people were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes.

A rabbi had authority to impose a decision with binding force. A scribe was a teacher of lower rank than a rabbi and did not possess this authority.

²³ In their synagogue was a man with an unclean spirit;

Jesus' first miracle in Mark's gospel is, significantly, an exorcism. In antiquity sickness was ascribed to evil spirits. The exorcism is a sign that in His presence the power of evil is reduced to impotency. God's rule is at hand.

²⁴ he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to

destroy us?

Jesus is, in effect, recognized as the Messiah, anointed with God's Spirit and possessing power over evil spirits.

I know who you are -

One's name revealed their destiny. To know one's adversary's name was to give one a magical power over him. The demon names Jesus twice: "Jesus of Nazareth" and "the Holy one of God" but has no power over Him.

the Holy One of God!"

"While Peter's confession sounded almost the same (Matthew 16:16), the crucial difference is that Peter confessed out of love, while the demon confessed out of fear." (Saint Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 416), *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 6,21).

²⁵ Jesus rebuked him

This is a technical term which means exorcized.

and said, "Quiet!

"He put a bridle in the mouths of the demons that cried after Him from the tombs. For although what they said was true, and they did not lie when they said, 'You are the Son of God' and 'the Holy One of God,' yet He did not wish that the truth should proceed from an unclean mouth, and especially from such as those who under pretense of truth might mingle with it their own malicious devices." [Saint Bede the Venerable (A.D. 673-735), *To the Bishops of Egypt* 3].

Come out of him!" ²⁶ The unclean spirit convulsed him and with a loud cry came out of him. ²⁷ All were amazed and asked one another, "What is this? A new teaching with authority. He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him." ²⁸ His fame spread everywhere throughout the whole region of Galilee.