

We know, perhaps all too well, how much we human beings can be a mystery to one another. For better or for worse, even longstanding spouses and best friends can discover things about each other that they never suspected. For those who choose to be disciples of Jesus Christ this is a great truth and blessing. No matter how well we think we know him, there are depths in Jesus that we will never cease exploring. He remains endlessly fascinating.

In the early chapters of Mark's gospel Jesus appears as a person of impressive authority. What he has to say has the ring of truth about it, and the power of his personality is such that he draws the most disturbed of human beings into the realm of well-being. Are we ready to follow him?

A reading from the book of Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Moses said to the people: 'Your God will raise up for you a prophet like myself, from among yourselves, from your own brothers; to him you must listen. This is what you yourselves asked of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the Assembly. "Do not let me hear again" you said "the voice of the Lord my God, nor look any longer on this great fire, or I shall die"; and the Lord said to me, "All they have spoken is well said. I will raise up a prophet like yourself for them from their own brothers; I will put my words into his mouth and he shall tell them all I command him. The man who does not listen to my words that he speaks in my name, shall be held answerable to me for it. But the prophet who presumes to say in my name a thing I have not commanded him to say, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die."

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 94:1-2, 6-9

R. If today, you hear his voice,
harden not your hearts.

Come, ring out our joy to the Lord;
hail the rock who saves us.
Let us come before him, giving thanks,
with songs let us hail the Lord. R.

Come in, let us kneel and bend low;
let us kneel before the God who made us
for he is our God and we
the people who belong to his pasture,
the flock that is led by his hand. R.

O that today you would listen to his voice!
'Harden not your hearts as at Meribah,
as on that day at Massah in the desert
when your fathers put me to the test;
when they tried me, though they saw my work.' R.

First Reading

Prophets figure prominently in the story of ancient Israel. In general prophets are those who serve as bearers of communication between a god or gods and human beings. In the Old Testament they convey God's message to his people Israel in word and action and in turn speak to God on behalf of the people. In Jewish tradition, Moses is the pre-eminent prophet and the book of Deuteronomy his "last will and testament", the full legacy of his teaching.

A perennial question was how to distinguish a false prophet from a true prophet. Today's reading from Deuteronomy is presented as if Moses was replying to a question like this from the people. He names two criteria given by the Lord himself. The true prophet speaks in the name of the living God and what the true prophet declares actually takes place. Such a test of authenticity is vividly exemplified in the battle between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18:20-40).

Apart from the opening phrase, the reading consists of Moses' reply to the people. But readers will note that the bulk of what he has to say is actually a report of an exchange between the people and the Lord at Mount Sinai. There are in fact four voices in this text: the narrator, Moses, the people, and the Lord. The reader's task is to ensure the congregation hears each one distinctly and understands who is speaking.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 94/95 falls into two contrasting halves. The first part is a resounding call to worship the Lord, in procession and prostration. This joyous summons leads into an abrupt change of tone. The second part of the psalm is a stern warning to heed the Lord. At first this radical shift of mood may be disconcerting, but it makes sense if the warning is seen as a means to get the assembly to settle down and prepare to pay attention to the Torah. A parallel may be seen in the swift transition from an opening hymn of praise to the penitential rite of the Mass.

Readers have no opportunity to explain this, but must proclaim the psalm as given, with two exuberant verses followed by one of admonition. The reader's tone of joy must change in the third verse to one of heartfelt pleading. Perhaps the sudden change will be less of a jolt for the congregation because the response they hear and pray first will have prepared the way for it.

A reading from the first letter of St Paul to the Corinthians

7:32-35

I would like to see you free from all worry. An unmarried man can devote himself to the Lord's affairs, all he need worry about is pleasing the Lord; but a married man has to bother about the world's affairs and devote himself to pleasing his wife: he is torn two ways. In the same way an unmarried woman, like a young girl, can devote herself to the Lord's affairs; all she need worry about is being holy in body and spirit. The married woman, on the other hand, has to worry about the world's affairs and devote herself to pleasing her husband. I say this only to help you, not to put a halter round your necks, but simply to make sure that everything is as it should be, and that you give your undivided attention to the Lord.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark 1:21-28

Jesus and his followers went as far as Capernaum, and as soon as the Sabbath came Jesus went to the synagogue and began to teach. And his teaching made a deep impression on them because, unlike the scribes, he taught them with authority.

In their synagogue just then there was a man possessed by an unclean spirit, and it shouted, 'What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are: the Holy One of God.' But Jesus said sharply, 'Be quiet! Come out of him!' And the unclean spirit threw the man into convulsions and with a loud cry went out of him. The people were so astonished that they started asking each other what it all meant. 'Here is a teaching that is new' they said 'and with authority behind it: he gives orders even to unclean spirits and they obey him.' And his reputation rapidly spread everywhere, through all the surrounding Galilean countryside.

Second Reading

Some readers may feel uncomfortable proclaiming today's passage from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. He plainly argues that marriage is a distraction from devotion to the Lord. Husbands and wives must put energy into pleasing each other rather than giving "undivided attention to the Lord". The unmarried, on the other hand, only have to "worry about . . . being holy in body and spirit".

Such teaching goes against the Church's contemporary understanding of marriage as the primary matrix for us to live out our discipleship of Jesus. Paul's advice must be interpreted in the light of his conviction that the end times were at hand. Life as he knew it was about to be swept up into the final consummation of all things, and mundane realities such as marriage would be transformed. We understand now that this remains a work in progress. As with the psalm, readers have no chance to offer a prior explanation to their listeners but must be true to the text that is before them.

It is worth noting that the NRSV prefaces the reading with an earlier verse. This helps make it clear that Paul's aim is to discourage the Corinthians from making any hasty change to their state of life while they await the Lord.

Gospel

Mark wastes no time drawing us into the hurly-burly of Jesus' ministry. No sooner has Jesus summoned the four fishermen to follow him than he is fully engaged in the two activities that most characterise his ministry in Mark: teaching and healing. More than that, he does both with power and authority. His teaching has the full force of authenticity, and his healing word is dramatically effective.

Curiously, Mark notes that this first ministry of Jesus takes place on the sabbath but records no controversy about Jesus' conducting an exorcism on this day of rest. He will turn to the issue of Jesus' actions on the sabbath and the debate they stirred up a little later on.

A recurring theme in Mark is the wilful unbelief of the disciples. By contrast those who recognise Jesus as God's holy one are the unclean spirits and outsiders. Time and again Mark will confront us with the question of who Jesus is.