Homily for 4 Epiphany, Year B

January 31, 2021

S. Stephen’s, Providence

*“And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority…”*

+ In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I find that one of the biggest challenges or barriers

to how people today approach and engage Scripture

is the whole worldview and mindset with which we bring to it,

instead of engaging it on its own terms,

and with a view to its various authors’ original intents.

What do I mean by that?

Well,

ever since the Age of so-called Enlightenment,

where Reason and Rational Thought were elevated and idolized,

we’ve tried to map onto Christianity and Scripture

rational approaches to texts and situations

whose only claim was about the nature of God,

and the nature of who Jesus Christ is.

Enlightenment principles would have us find a way to explain away

scenes like the one we encounter in today’s Gospel,

where we find a man possessed by a demon,

whom Jesus then exorcises.

It doesn’t help, I suppose,

that when we hear the word exorcism nowadays,

we immediately think of movies like The Exorcist,

with violent contortions and poltergeist-like activity.

Enlightenment principles would reduce Jesus to simply a great moral teacher –

a source of ethical thought,

alongside Buddhist sages, Sufi mystics, or perhaps like Moses.

Our readings today from the Hebrew Scriptures and the Gospel of Mark

provide an excellent opportunity this morning

to show why that approach is both untrue,

and misses the point entirely about who Jesus is,

and what the truth of Christianity is about.

Again, what do I mean?

Well, in our reading from Deuteronomy,

Moses says to the people of Israel,

“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.”

Now why is that significant?

Well, this is Moses saying this.

Moses, the greatest figure of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Moses, the only one permitted to glimpse God.

Moses, who leads Israel out of slavery in Egypt into freedom.

Moses, who parted the Red Sea,

and who received the Law – the Ten Commandments – from God himself.

Moses is practically next to God in Jewish thought.

There is no prophet greater than Moses,

and it is from God himself that Moses derives his authority.

But then, here is Moses saying,

“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.”

Someone like Moses.

What adds to the significance of this statement is that

the book of Deuteronomy as we have received it

was compiled somewhere between the 7th and 5th centuries BCE,

at which point,

some of the other great prophets like Elijah and Ezekiel

have already come and gone:

and yet, this line of thought – this prediction, or foretelling, persists.

Who is this man who will be as great as Moses who God will raise up

from among Israel, and when will he arise?

Now we can look at today’s Gospel reading from Mark,

and appreciate the significance of what is happening there.

Jesus and his disciples go into the synagogue on the Sabbath,

a time where like all faithful Jews,

they will study the Torah, the Law of Moses,

and rabbinical wisdom and insight will be shared and taught.

This rabbinic teaching also hinges on the authority of Moses –

for every Jewish scribe and rabbi have a tradition of ascribing their authority

to a teacher, who in turn ascribes his authority to his teacher,

and so on and so on,

all the way back to Moses, the first teacher,

and Moses, of course, derives his teaching from God.

Well here we have Jesus teaching in the synagogue,

and we are told that all “were astonished at his teaching,

for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.”

… for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as one of the scribes.

This is classic Markan irony, which permeates the Gospel of Mark –

because of course, Jesus is God incarnate.

The original Greek used for “as one who had authority” also helps us

understand just what is meant here –

essentially it means that Jesus is teaching out of his own substance –

speaking with authority that is derived from himself and no other.

Of course this is because the Word of God is teaching and commenting

on his own instruction and law.

This is the prophet whom Moses foresaw and knew would one day arise –

a prophet even greater than he.

The Lord your God will raise up a prophet like me from among you,

and you will listen to him.

This Jesus, the Son of God,

is someone who we need to listen to.

As Christians, we understand that when Jesus speaks,

we are hearing not just his voice, but God’s voice.

What happens next in our Gospel reading drives on home that point even further:

for we are told that a man with an unclean spirit is present in the synagogue,

and he cries 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.”

This is a sermon for another time, but here again is classic Markan irony –

Gentiles and demons know Jesus’s true identity as Messiah and God Incarnate,

while even Jesus’ disciples never quite seem to figure it out.

This man possessed with an unclean spirit speaks not in the singular, but the plural:

“What have you to do with us?”

It evokes other moments in the Gospel where Jesus encounters demonic forces,

who always speak in the plural, saying my name is Legion, for we are many.

In a way, this man represents all the forces of sin and wickedness

which seek to sow division and disruption,

to harm and to destroy the works of God.

Jesus, the Author of Life, and the Word of God commands the unclean spirit

to be silent! and to come out of the man!

And of course, what the Incarnate Word of God commands is obeyed,

and the unclean spirit departs from the man.

When Jesus speaks, it is so – for he speaks as one with authority.

And all are, we are told, understandably amazed.

“What is this new teaching?” they ask one another.

“With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”

My friends,

sin and division are still in the world – we know that.

There is injustice in the world,

and there is suffering.

There are forces which still seek to divide and destroy the children of God.

Like our Gospel reading today,

these forces of division come from within and not from outside:

the man with an unclean spirit is someone inside the synagogue,

not a Gentile outsider or a Roman soldier.

As we see from time to time,

sometimes the great Deceiver sews division from within the Church,

and sin can begin to infect from within,

as opposed to an outside force.

I say that not meaning to cast suspicion on your neighbor,

nor meaning to hint at anything specific within our own church or parish.

But consider the Roman Catholic Church

and the ongoing sex abuse scandals which seem to continue to unfold

as more and more is revealed,

most recently the multiple cover ups related to former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick.

Many tried to speak up – bishops even – but they were ignored or silence.

As Pope Francis and others have recognized,

and like our Gospel reading today,

sometimes you have to name the sin and call it out before it can be cast out.

It’s something anyone who has ever struggled with addiction or anxiety can tell you:

you can’t cast out that darkness and that sin until you name it.

While I think that many of us in this country are still trying to wrap our minds

around the events of the past year related to racial injustice and civil unrest,

the truth is that our country will never be able to heal itself or be cleansed

from the original sin of racism and slavery

until we can name it openly.

These are just a few examples.

But hear the Good News my friends:

which is that God is all-powerful to save,

and that the works of the devil are no match for the might of God.

And through Jesus – through his death and resurrection –

sin and death have already been rendered powerless.

They can no longer conquer or destroy, even though they rear their heads

from time to time.

The love of God is stronger.

As Christians, we follow this Jesus – the Son of God – the Word of God Incarnate –

not just an ethical teacher or a wise mystic:

we follow Jesus, who yes, taught as one with authority –

one who, on the night before he died, gave us a new commandment:

that we love one another as he loved us.

That command is from the heart of God himself.

We know from the words of Jesus that when God speaks,

he speaks into being peace and unity and healing and life,

just as at creation God speaks light and harmony into being

out of darkness and chaos.

That is the power of God.

My brothers and sisters, I pray that we may have the grace always

to turn away from voices which seek to divide or harm,

and instead turn always to the voice of him who hath brought you out of darkness

into his marvelous light.

The voice of him who says I am the Way the Truth and the Life.

The voice of him who says Follow me.

The voice of him who says Do this for the remembrance of me.

The voice of him who says Love one another,

and by this will the world know that ye are my disciples.

May listen to this voice always, and obey his command.

Amen.