

Divergence on the Lectionary - Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B

First Reading

Deuteronomy 18:15–20

“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—just as you desired of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.’ And the LORD said to me, ‘They are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.’ (ESV)

Second Reading

1 Corinthians 8

Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.

Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.” For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed 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.

However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Mark 1:21–28

And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. And immediately 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, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, “What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Our passage for this week from Deuteronomy is familiar to many of us. It is the passage that Peter cites in 3 when he declares that Jesus is in fact the prophet like Moses whom Moses himself promised. This understanding of Deuteronomy 18 is so pervasive in Christian circles that it is easy to forget that it was understood very differently by the people of Israel for hundreds of years before Peter.

While Christians have accepted Peter’s interpretation of Moses’ promise of a prophet like himself as referring to Jesus for a very long time, when Moses spoke it is likely that he only intended to refer to a continuing prophetic line that would speak in God’s name as Moses had done, providing ongoing guidance to the people in a land where the locals looked to magicians and soothsayers. There is a “collective” sense to the “prophet” that Moses promises. He doesn’t speak of a Messianic figure or a single final prophet at the end of a line of prophets.

How does that impact our understanding of Jesus as the fulfillment of this prophecy? Can we still stand alongside Peter and point to Jesus as the prophet of whom Moses spoke? I think we still can. In the same way that Isaiah spoke of the young woman who would give birth, referring to someone known to him at the time, Moses spoke of one particular future. But standing in the light of the revelation of God’s gracious will in Jesus and hearing through the Spirit we are able to see how the text can mean more

than one thing. We see only in part. Even the prophets of the Old Testament saw only in part. They saw one truth, but only a partial truth. That we would all draw hope from a young woman's babe, that we would all find guidance in a prophet like Moses, this was a truth they saw in part, and understood it in its most immediate manifestation. That doesn't invalidate its fulfillment in Jesus. But neither does it allow us to run roughshod over the prophet's immediate understanding, as though it were unimportant or invalid on its own. To be faithful to the text I think we have to hold them in balance.

Second Reading

This passage from 1 Corinthians 8 is enormously important to me. It seeks to balance the freedom we have in Christ with the concern for our siblings in Christ that comes alongside it. That is, because we are free in Christ most things are permissible, including the eating of food that has previously been offered to idols. We know there's nothing to the idols, that there is no God but the God and Father of Jesus Christ, so the idol offering is meaningless.

But what of those people who believe in Jesus but whose "knowledge" is not as acute or expansive as ours? What does it do to them to see us going into the temple of Apollo or Aesclepius and consuming food offered to them? If it encourages them to do something of which their conscience is still afraid, what have we done? In this case my love for my sibling in Christ outweighs my freedom in Him and I am constrained. I do not do what I am permitted to do, not for the sake of my own salvation or holiness, but for the sake of another.

This is a very important aspect of Paul's theology that is given too little attention to suit me. What freedoms do we have that we flaunt before other Christians as though to thumb our noses at their "ignorance?" What freedoms might we surrender for their sake so that we might help them find their way to the freedom we already know? These are questions that I wish were asked more often, and I hope that in your study of this text you will think on them as well.

Gospel Text

Our reading from Mark this week comes from a rather long stretch in the Gospel that doesn't fit into the larger chiasm that gives shape to the whole book. This is due in large part to the presence in this section of a smaller chiasm first identified by Joanna Dewey in 1973. ([Link](#)) It was Dewey's article that first caused me to wonder about the larger structure of the Gospel when considering the *inclusio* of the tearing of the heavens that mark its beginning and end. (This shorter chiasm is also centered on an indirect prediction of Jesus' crucifixion.)

But that chiasm only accounts for roughly the latter half of the material that creates a gap in the larger structure. Our reading comes from the first half. In this section Mark's pacing is positively breathless. Of the 42 occurrences of "immediately" (*euthus*) in Mark, 7 of them occur in these few verses concluding chapter one. There is a sense of urgency as Jesus' career begins with His preaching of the Gospel, the calling of the first four disciples, and His demonstrations of power and authority. It concludes with Jesus' healing of a leper, who is told to tell no one, but who tells everyone. These stories of His meteoric (for Mark) rise to popularity then sets Jesus on the collision course that leads us into the controversy stories that first draw our attention to Jesus' crucifixion.

This "gap" in the larger chiasm of Mark's Gospel is matched by a similar period near the end of the Gospel. In this earlier section we have Dewey's smaller chiasm which centers on the Bridegroom being taken away. In the latter Mark gives us the narrative of Jesus' crucifixion. I don't think that is coincidence.

So our reading for 4 Epiphany is a part of the immediate momentum in Jesus' ministry as Mark relates it to us. It fits marvelously with the theme of the "manifestation" of Jesus, though it lacks the Epiphany emphasis of manifestation to the Gentiles, to the larger world. This particular story is marked by a couple of things worthy of note. First, the "unclean spirit" recognizes Jesus when most still do not. Second, Jesus silences the spirit. This fits rather neatly with Jesus' command to the leper at the end of chapter one to tell no one what has happened to him. One scholar I read suggested that this silencing of the spirit was a common part of exorcism. Knowing and speaking one's name (The Holy One of God) gave you power over them, so Jesus commanded the spirit not to speak. That may well be the case, but I think that Mark's inclusion of this detail fits more neatly into the attempts of Jesus to slow the growth of His fame in the initial days of His ministry. From the outset we see Jesus seeking to minimize the conflict that is already rushing Him toward the Cross. When we hear the people exclaim "A new teaching! And with authority!" we can already hear the inexorable march to the moment of His trial at the hands of those whose authority He threatens and His execution.