



Epiphany 4 (B)

Building Up the Church

[RCL] Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

The gospel, on this fourth Sunday in the season of Epiphany, plunges us into the acts and words of one who speaks with authority. The light of Epiphany shines today on the character of the one sent from God. The evangelist Mark zeroes in on this divine quality at the very beginning of his gospel. He says of those listening to Jesus in the Capernaum synagogue: “They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes.”

The people in that synagogue knew what the scribes had written. To them, no one was as important, as authoritative a prophet, as Moses. Maybe, hearing the young man from Nazareth on this day, they are remembering the words of Moses concerning true prophets: “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people: you shall heed such a prophet.”

We know from the unfolding of the stories, both in the Hebrew scriptures and in the gospels, that true prophets are recognized but rarely heeded. We seem to prefer magicians to prophets. It is much easier to solve problems through magic than to spend a lifetime of obedience to the words of the prophets and the demands Christ makes in our lives.

Throughout history, movements arose to make easy knowledge of the divine possible – Gnosticism, theosophy, efforts to call back the dead in order to talk to them – as well as our modern emphasis on meditation as an alternative to prayer and study of the scriptures; one can spend hours enumerating human efforts to avoid the words of the true prophets and to ignore the one who speaks with authority.

It is truly fascinating to read the verses that precede the first lesson read today in Deuteronomy. They enumerate practices that are very old but are still to be found in our times:

“No one shall be found among you who makes a son or daughter pass through fire, or who practices divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or one who casts spells, or who consults ghosts or spirits or who seeks oracles from the dead.”

Think, for instance, on titles of popular movies and television shows and remember how many of these practices are found in the culture of the day. As an interesting sidelight, that first practice mentioned – passing through fire – is still found during Epiphany in certain villages of northern Greece. There the faithful, carrying

icons of Constantine and Helen, dance until they become ecstatic and then walk over burning coals without suffering from the fire. They are called *anastenáridhes*. Human beings are attracted to magical solutions and practices. The new faithful are oftentimes confused: Is this something a Christian is allowed to practice or to believe?

This happened very early in the Christian church. The Corinthian believers of the first century, surrounded as they were by so many gods and the different cultures and worship of various people who thronged that rich city, were confused about what Christ asked of them and by what they had learned while living in a multicultural city. They had written to Paul to ask a variety of questions. Among them was the question of diet. Was it proper to eat the meat of animals after these animals had been sacrificed to a pagan god? This was practiced widely in the Roman world. They would offer the whole animal as sacrifice at their pagan temple, but then the meat would be sliced and sold in the marketplace. Some of the new Christians who felt superior because they had knowledge – they were educated – felt free to buy and eat this meat. Others, afraid that they would fall into the sin of idol worship, would refrain from eating meat and would eat only vegetables. Today of course they would be praised as being vegetarian, but in those days food was scarce and people who were knowledgeable were more concerned with feeding their families than with the niceties of the new religion that had its roots in very old Hebrew traditions.

The problem with Paul's congregation was that the educated ones made fun of the ones who refused to buy the meat. Paul, who probably would have eaten the meat because he knew that it would not defile him, had great compassion for the weaker members of the *ekklesia*. It is evident from his writings that he dreaded being a stumbling block to a new Christian. He would do anything to support the weak in order not to cause one of them to be afraid or to be lost. Having learned from his Lord what mattered, he zeroed in on what built the congregation and disregarded what puffed up the congregation. Today he probably would ask us: "Do you have a fine choir, a gorgeous building? Good for you. But do you also welcome the stranger? Do you open your doors and hearts to the weak and the poor? Take care of what builds up the body of Christ."

Paul spoke with the authority of one who lived in total obedience to the one who had called him by name. Jesus spoke with the authority of one who had come from God. We see clearly from the admonitions of Jesus to his followers not to speak about his miracles that he did not want his miracles to attract people to him. He wanted the Word of God to be the central Good News he was proclaiming. But his compassion for the hurting was so great that he could not ignore them but whenever they came before him, he healed them.

But always, always he made sure that the least of his followers – the blind, the weak, the poor, the despised women and the neglected children – were given equal status with those who had the power and who were respected as religious authorities. He made sure that they knew that God loved them and that God had no patience with hypocrisy and self-righteousness. That was his authority; the authority of the true prophet. He spoke and lived and acted in the name of the one who sent him to the world, to us, and this is the one on whom the light of Epiphany shines today. May we see it and rejoice.

This sermon, written by Katerina Whitley, originally ran January 31, 2015.