

HOMILY FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME-JANUARY 31, 2021

READINGS: Deuteronomy 18: 15-20;

Responsorial Psalm-Psalm 95;

1 Corinthians 7: 32-35;

Gospel of Mark 1:21-28

As teachers of faith, we reveal God's presence.

Do you remember any of your teachers? What makes the person so memorable? During the course of our school years we encounter teachers from primary school to college. These teachers are different with different areas of knowledge but they all share one goal-- to teach us. They teach us because they have been found qualified by the appropriate authorities to do so. The teachers have been given the authority to teach. They cannot teach without permission from the appropriate authorities. On this Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time the three readings invite us to reflect on the spiritual significance of what it means to teach with authority.

We begin with the first reading from the Book of Deuteronomy. Today's passage begins with "Moses spoke to the people; he said: The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own kin". A prophet is a person who speaks for God. A prophet speaks in the name of God. God would put his words into the mouth of the prophet who would come after Moses. Today's passage forms part of a long discourse of instructions about the commandments and statutes of God that Moses gave to his people as he led them into the Promised Land. In his discourse Moses exhorted his people to be faithful to the covenant. Before today's passage we read that Moses taught the people not to participate in the abominable practices of the inhabitants of the land that the Israelites were going to possess. According to Moses, the future prophet would have the authority to teach the people about God's commands. On the other hand, it would be the responsibility of the people to listen to the words of the prophet. They would live according to what the prophet would teach them. God would hold accountable "anyone who does not heed the words that he shall speak in my name".

The story about the coming of Moses' successor in the first reading leads us into today's Gospel passage from Mark. Today's passage comes immediately after the passage we read last Sunday about the call of the first disciples. Today's passage begins with "The disciples went to Capernaum". The passage therefore leads us to the narrative of some of the events in the life of Jesus in Capernaum. Jesus did two things when he visited the synagogue on the Sabbath. He taught the people and healed a man with an evil spirit. Jesus' teaching made a great impression on those who heard him speak. What did Jesus say to the people to impress them? The people even compared Jesus' teaching to that of the scribes and noticed that Jesus taught with authority.

The scribes were considered to be knowledgeable in the Law of God and therefore they had the authority to teach the people. It is interesting to note that even though

the scribes were teachers of the Law, they didn't use the formula of the past prophets-- "Thus says the Lord", thus claiming to speak for God. The scribes used their knowledge of the Law of God and of the words of the past prophets to teach the people. On the other hand, Jesus didn't even teach like the past prophets but he taught as one claiming authority himself. For example, Jesus spoke directly to the evil spirit in the possessed person, "Be silent and come out of him" and the evil spirit even obeyed. In Jesus' time, many people performed exorcisms. However, they did that with elaborate rituals and incantations and with little success. The action of the exorcists was different from what Jesus did. Jesus' action in healing the possessed man was even considered by the people as "a new teaching-with authority".

We can say that the story from today's first reading and the story in today's Gospel passage are parallel to each other. The future prophet in the first reading would teach and act for God. Jesus taught and acted for God. The teaching and action of Moses in the Book of Exodus revealed divine truths about God. The reading from the Book of Deuteronomy presents Moses as the ideal prophet. The future prophet would be like Moses himself who would speak God's words to the people. The Jews believed that God would raise up in the last days a prophet like Moses.

Jesus' teaching and action in the Gospel passage revealed God as God of power and love. The Evangelist Mark begins his entire Gospel by identifying Jesus as "the Son of God". Throughout the Gospel the Evangelist has depicted Jesus as a teacher who taught with authority in the sense that his teaching was usually accompanied with divine acts of power and love, such as healing the sick. When we read today's passage from Mark in the light of the first reading, we see Jesus as the fulfillment of the awaited prophet in the first reading. Jesus is the true Prophet who through his teaching and mighty acts revealed his identity as the Son of God.

In his First Letter to the Corinthians from the second reading, Paul exhorted the early Christians to give their undivided attention to Jesus, the true Prophet of God. Today's passage immediately comes after the passage we read last Sunday. In that passage, Paul encouraged the early Christians to develop an attitude of detachment from the things of this world "for the present form of this world is passing away". At the time of writing today's passage, Paul and the early Christians were still expecting the Second Coming of Christ at any moment. It was in the context of the imminent coming of Jesus that Paul wrote to the early Christians against marriage. According to Paul, an unmarried person would be more able to dedicate himself/herself to the things of God. Paul wanted the early Christians to be free from distractions so that they would be able to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, what do the three readings say to us who believe in God? What can we learn from the story of Moses' successor and the story of Jesus in today's readings? These two questions bring us back to the questions asked at the beginning of the homily--Do you remember any of your teachers and what makes the person memorable? Today's stories about Moses, his successor and Jesus reveal that there is more than just teaching others in the areas of our expertise. How

a primary school teacher teaches is different from how a College teacher teaches. Yet, when we look back at our school days we might remember the teachers whose teaching and actions had a positive impact on our lives. We can still remember some of the teachers who have had a deep impression on us. Their teaching and their lives inspired us, motivated us and brought us hope.

As Christians, Jesus continues to teach us through the Gospel. We need to listen to him and to act on what he teaches. We as members of the community also teach other. It is our responsibility to teach our children so that they are prepared to receive the sacraments. We can therefore learn to teach with authority by the way we live, by the way we treat others and by the way we encourage others. These are all actions of our faith that makes us grow as children of God, and bring us closer to God and to each other. The living presence of God works among us as we engage in actions of faith. Following the footsteps of the prophets, following the teachings of Jesus, we walk as teachers of faith for our families and communities.

Fr. Yaw Acheampong

(Please note that this homily has been prepared for a congregation at a distance).