

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME-B

January 28, 2018

First Reading – Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Responsorial Psalm – Psalm 95

Second Reading – Corinthians 7:32-35

Gospel – Mark 1:21-28

My dear people of God:

For us to have a good grasp of our First Reading(which we took from the Book of Deuteronomy, chapter 18, verses 15 to 20), we have to consider the context where it belongs and the verses that immediately precede it. From the preceding verses (9-14), we can read: *“When you have come into the land which Yahweh your God gives you, you shall not learn to do after the abominations of those nations”* (verse 9). Yahweh specifically prohibits passing children through the fire (the pagans surrounding the Israelites practiced child sacrifice), and divination, soothsaying, sorcery, casting spells, inquiring of spirits, and seeking oracles from the dead.

“For whoever does these things is an abomination to Yahweh: and because of these abominations Yahweh your God does drive (the inhabitants of this land) out from before you. You shall be perfect with Yahweh your God. For these nations, that you shall dispossess, listen to those who practice sorcery, and to diviners; but as for you, Yahweh your God has not allowed you so to do” (verse 12-14).

Please know that these are important prohibitions, because they strike at the heart of practices that look for spiritual guidance to sources other than Yahweh. To practice divination or sorcery or inquiring of spirits would be an abomination to Yahweh because they constitute a spiritual alternative to Yahweh or simply put, disloyalty to Yahweh.

Let us recall that Deuteronomy 13:1-5 also prohibits divination by dreams as well as omens or portents. The prohibition from verses 4 to 5 in chapter 13 is very clear: *“You shall walk after Yahweh your God, and fear him, and keep his*

commandments, and obey his voice, and you shall serve him, and cling to him. That prophet, or that dreamer of dreams, shall be put to death, because he has spoken rebellion against Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed you out of the house of bondage, to draw you aside out of the way which Yahweh your God commanded you to walk in. So you shall put away the evil from the midst of you” (Deuteronomy 13:4-5).

Brothers and sisters: These verses should push us to question spiritual alternatives to God in today’s world: Astrology, Tarot, Numerology, and other similar practices. We need to understand that such practices are contrary to God’s will.

Our First Reading which is from verses 15 to 20, talks about spiritual guidance from Yahweh for the Israelites. Yahweh will raise up a prophet for them: **“a prophet from the midst of you, of your brothers, like me. You shall listen to him”**, says Moses.

Listening or obeying is very important here. The Hebrew word for *listen* is SHAMA. This is according to what the people wanted from Yahweh (in Horeb in the day of the assembly). When they were in the presence of Yahweh and heard His voice, they were afraid to die watching His fire. They declared that they will listen to His representative.

Please understand that this prophet (whom Yahweh will raise like Moses), is to give the Israelites spiritual enlightenment and direction. As a result, they will not have any need to rely on divination, soothsaying, and sorcery. This is greatly to Israel’s advantage, because Yahweh’s prophet will lead them rightly, while divination, soothsaying, and sorcery are false disciplines that have no power and reveal no truth.

In what manner/way will the coming prophet be like Moses? Our reading does not specify, but we can assume that, like Moses, this prophet will be called by God and will be faithful to the call. Also, like Moses, he will speak the word that Yahweh gives him and will call Israel to be faithful to that word. Yahweh will raise up this prophet from among the covenant people, the Israelites. He will not go outside the covenant community for this purpose.

Brothers and sisters, I want you to look far, and see the Messianic character of this *prophet* spoken of by Moses. Please recall that in the New Testament, when the people heard Jesus speak, they said, **“This is truly the**

prophet who comes into the world” (John 6:14) and *“This is truly the prophet”* (John 7:40).

If Jesus then is the prophet, then we must listen and obey Him. I wish to offer the Responsorial Psalm as an invitation from the Lord Himself, telling us not to remain in our hard-headedness but to hear His voice.

Now, let us go to our Second Reading. A little review of the lessons we learned from our second reading last Sunday would be beneficial. Let us recall that Paul is concerned with the “soon-to-come” end of the world. It was urgent and expedient to turn to the matter of married couples and the singles. He recommends that they remain in their present state (7:25-28). The basis for his recommendation is: *“in view of the impending crisis, it is well for you to remain as you are”* (7:26).

We learned that Paul's imminent eschatology or his sense of the end of all things coming soon, governs all that he said. It is the foundation for the way of life that he recommends. We also learned what Paul said with his use of the expression “as though not”. “Disengagement” or detachment from the world, and from all that is transitory is the best way to live our temporary and borrowed lives. There is no point in becoming consumed or even entangled with the world and its concerns, for the *“present form of this world is passing away.”*

Today Paul talks about the unmarried person who is less anxious about the cares of the world and has more attention to the things of the Lord. In contrast to this unmarried person is the married person who is anxious about the things of the world, how he may please his spouse and he is divided. Please understand that the focus of Paul is on HOW TO BEST PLEASE THE LORD. And he says in verse 35: *“I am telling you this for your own benefit, not to impose a restraint upon you, but for the sake of propriety and adherence to the Lord without distraction.”*

The whole force of the passage is that married persons have, in the fulfilment of their obligations to each other, an additional interest and concern from which the unmarried are free. It must ever be distinctly borne in mind that this advice was given solely under the impression that the end of all earthly things was impending. We all know that Paul does not condemn marriage, rather he exhorts all Christians to practice *holy indifference toward the world.*

Now, let us go to the Gospel:

Mark's Gospel tells us that Jesus preached in synagogues seventeen different times. For thirty years of His life, Jesus worked with His rough carpenter hands. Now He was about to work with His golden tongue and miraculous words.

Today, Mark tells us that Jesus entered the synagogue of Capernaum on a sabbath and taught there. Mark does not tell us what Jesus taught. But whatever the message was, it stunned His audience. It was not the usual rhetorics of the other rabbis and teachers that the people in the synagogue were so often subjected to. His words must have pierced their hearts that the evangelist Mark commented: *"He taught with personal authority and not as the Scribes taught."* Please understand that back then, the scholars of the law would preface their remarks with such lines as "Rabbi So and So says..." or "It is alleged..." or "It is commonly taught..."

My dear people of God, that was not the Nazarene's style. He did not tell His audience what other rabbis were teaching. Rather, He taught with and on His own authority. He did not teach this way: "It may be..." but rather *"Amen, amen I say to you..."* He required no credentials beyond Himself. If one does not subscribe to a Divine Jesus, one must put Him down as a most arrogant person. It is worth mentioning that His audience did not put Him down as such. They felt that there was power in His words as He spoke. They sensed they were in God's presence.

He was seen as being a refreshing contrast to the scribes who spoke nice sermons, while Jesus spoke with authority.

Then, the evangelist Mark mentions the presence of a man with an unclean spirit who "rudely" interrupts Jesus. Again, it is worth mentioning how the Master reacted. He stops His talk and exorcises the possessed man. What message is Mark telling us? Firstly, the Master is backing up His message with Divine Power. Secondly He reveals He is as much interested in people's bodies as in their souls. He is concerned with the whole person. Never could we hear that Jesus refuses to cure a sick person. Jesus was not afraid of getting involved in the nitty gritty of people's lives. He worked with His hands as often as He spoke with His mouth.

Brothers and sisters: The people were amazed because they had never experienced someone speaking with such authority. Jesus held people spellbound because God gave Him the authority to teach the truth. This authority would never be removed from Jesus because Jesus was intimately united to His ABBA (Father), the SOURCE of the authority. He had the ABBA experience. We share in the authority of the Lord to the extent that we are united to the SOURCE of this authority. When we are confirmed we receive the power, the authority, to defeat evil in the world and to lead others to Jesus, the SOURCE of all truth. This authority is given to us by God. God can remove this authority and will remove this authority if we refuse to stay intimately united to HIM. God has entrusted us with His authority only to the extent that we allow Him into our lives. That is the reason why the Church is always encouraging us to attend Mass regularly and receive the Sacraments regularly. We need to have union with God so we can bring His authority, His power to the world. The crowd was spellbound because Jesus spoke with authority, not like the scribes and Pharisees.

People are no different now than they were then. People want to hear the real Word of God, and feel the presence of God in the words of the speaker. We can do this. We have the authority to do this. People can witness the Word of God present in our lives, and then choose to make the Word of God present in their own lives. We can do this. We can make Jesus' presence real for others. Today we pray that we may remain united to the Lord, the source of the power and the authority we have received.

The key, of course, in Jesus life is that all this work was backed up with prayer. And by prayer what we mean is quality time communing with God, spending time alone with Him deepening our relationship with the God we love. This is where Jesus drew His strength and it is exactly the same place from which we ought to draw our strength. The work of healing and teaching and exorcising is there to be done, more than ever before. Our task is to step up to the plate and follow the example of our Divine Master.