

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7, 7-9

1 Corinthians 7:32-35

Matthew 1:21-28

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On the day of the assembly at Horeb, the chosen people saw and heard God. It was a terrifying experience that they didn't care to repeat. God agreed that another arrangement would be preferable, and said to Moses, "I will raise up for them a prophet *like you* from among their kinsmen, and put my words into his mouth; he shall tell them all that I command him." But Moses died, and as we read at the end of Deuteronomy, "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform... "

But the people never forgot God's promise to send them a powerful prophet who, like Moses, had seen the very face of God. And the belief grew up, that when this great prophet finally arrived, he would be the messiah, the savior of Israel. By the time of Jesus, Israel's situation had become desperate, and the expectation of the messiah's arrival had reached a fever pitch.

And, now, as we read at the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, a young man had begun gathering disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. As it was the Sabbath, he and his little band had come to the synagogue to join the community in prayer. It seemed appropriate to ask the young fellow to say a word to the congregation. So Jesus rose to speak.

It might help to understand what happened next, if we pause here

to consider an event said to have occurred in another land, a few centuries later. All the great and good were gathered at Canterbury to pray for a sign from God to tell them who should be king. While they were at prayer, a marble stone appeared in the churchyard with a steel anvil upon it, and in the anvil was stuck a naked sword with gold letters shining upon the hilt. A learned clerk read out the words: "Whoso pulleth out this sword from this stone and anvil is rightful king of all England."

Anyone who liked was encouraged to try to draw the sword. All the most powerful Lords tried their hand. They wrenched at the sword till their muscles were tied in knots, but it did not stir. Finally an unknown fair-haired youth stepped forward and slipped the sword effortlessly from the stone. He was able to draw the sword not because he was strong, but because of who he was: Arthur, son of Uther, the rightful king of England.

In a small way, this story reflects what is happening in our Gospel. Jesus begins to speak, and the people are astonished at the authority with which he teaches. But now a man possessed by an unclean spirit enters the synagogue. The spirit cries out, "What do you want of us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are -- the Holy One of God."

It must have seemed to the assembly that the young man was in terrible trouble. There was an ancient tradition that to know someone's name gave power over him or her. This unclean spirit knew Jesus' name. It was just possible, that by complicated ritual and elaborate magic display, a particularly holy person could, with might and main, overcome such a spirit. But what chance did this young man have? But Jesus simply said, "Be quiet! Come out of the man!" And the unclean spirit

obeyed -- not because Jesus had spoken a magic formula or performed a ritual, but because of who he was. There was one *greater* than Moses here. The messiah had come.