

## Homily for The Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B) (31<sup>st</sup> January 2021)

The scripture readings today take us to a place of ending, and to a place of beginning. The first reading is from Deuteronomy, which is an extended address that Moses makes to the people just before they enter the promised land. He is not going with them, he will die before they cross the river into the land that will be their own and will bring their wanderings to an end. So, the first reading is a part of Moses' farewell speech to the people who he has led for forty years. It is time to hand them over to new leaders and to a new phase in the life of the nation. We can expect, then, that what he has to say to them will be pretty important.

What Moses gives the people in this passage is an introduction to prophecy. A prophet is someone who has a solemn duty. It is a duty on which his life depends. If he speaks words that are false; if he speaks words of his own, and dresses them up as if they come from God, he will pay with his life. Prophecy will be so central to the health of the nation, this idea that there are some people who will speak the truth without fear or favour, pointing out the future consequences of present actions, that it absolutely must be genuine.

The Gospel reading, on the other hand, marks a time of beginning. Last week we heard how Jesus called the first of his followers, and this passage follows immediately from that. Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John leave their boats behind and follow Jesus, and immediately they go to Capernaum, and wait for the Sabbath day to arrive. When it does, he leads them into the synagogue, and their training for discipleship begins there and then. They watch him teaching, and they watch him healing. It is interesting that we are not told what he says: for St Mark, at least on this occasion, the content is not what matters. Lesson one is: watch how this man's teaching is deeply impressive, because he teaches with authority. When the followers of Jesus are sent out to do their own preaching this is what they will need to take with them: the ability to speak with authority. So many people, both then and now, were dramatically unconvincing, but this must not be said of them.

What does it mean to say that Jesus teaches with authority? It is more than just a forceful style, or a clever argument. When Jesus speaks to the people they are left with a sense that what they have heard is complete, nothing is missing. He is a window into the heart of God; he is not telling the people something he has read in a book, or heard about in a class; he is revealing to them something he has experienced for himself. He reveals to them the perfection of humanity, he shows them just how beautiful a human life can be, because he reveals to them the most perfect of human lives: his own. Listening to him people recognise themselves; they recognise who they are, what is missing in them, what they need most and, most importantly, they recognise who they could become. He reveals to them the extraordinary wonder of what a human life could be, and it is so very beautiful, so inspiring, so surprising that they are speechless for a moment. When Jesus speaks to the people at Capernaum, he leaves them with a sense of hope and wonder at just how good human life can be. This is literally a revelation to them. It must have been scary for his first followers: there is no way we can measure up to this, no way we can preach like this!

Jesus shows his followers the very fullest version of the prophecy Moses called for. The words he speaks are God's words, and God's alone. Nothing is added, and nothing is taken away.

What does it mean to speak with authority? Poor and sinful, broken and selfish, none of us can hope to speak with the authority that Christ had. A speaker speaks with authority when they talk about things they are struggling to achieve, rather than telling you about their triumphant successes. They speak with authority when they tell you stories that risk bursting the bubble of their own importance, rather than when they show you how perfect they are. They speak with authority when they begin with what is good in other people, rather than with what is bad. They speak with authority when they show that before opening their mouths to speak, they had first opened their ears to listen. They speak with authority when what they tell you helps you to find a more perfect way of living (even if, at the time, you may not really want to hear it). They speak with authority if they are trying to help you learn more about yourself rather than encouraging you to hide from the truth. They speak with authority when they are speaking first and foremost to themselves, but in effect letting you listen in to what they are saying. The person who speaks with authority helps us feel more human, more connected and more accepted. They allow us to see that our hopes are not beyond attaining, and our fears do not need to rule us.