

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes  
Santa Barbara, CA**

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B – January 29, 2012

**Gary Becker**

Reflections on **Deuteronomy 18:15-20;**  
**1 Corinthians 7:32-35; Mark 1:21-28**

**I**t is certainly not difficult to connect the First Reading and the Gospel this week. In the first reading Moses is preaching to the people on the banks of the Jordan and promising that the people would not be without a leader after he is gone. He tells the people that God will raise up a prophet from among them, and that they must listen to that prophet. The Gospel reading from Mark emphasizes how Jesus is that prophet who has come to teach in a new way, and who teaches with authority.

And then we have the second reading from Paul. It is a little puzzling to the modern ear, but it is simply a continuation of last week where Paul states that the world as we know it is passing away. This week continues Paul's admonishment not to be distracted by the normal priorities of life, but to prepare to live in the fullness of the reign of God.

This passage has caused some to conclude that Paul believed the unmarried state was to be preferred to the married state, but Diana Bregant points out that it is important to understand that Paul firmly believed that Christ's return was imminent. He was simply encouraging the Corinthian community not to be distracted by any worldly concerns. I would also observe that, like Paul, I would like for all of you to be free of all worries.

So let's look at the other two scriptures in more depth and see what we find. The book of Deuteronomy is the fifth book of the Torah or Law. Its title, Deuteronomy, means second law, but that doesn't mean it is a second set of laws, but instead that it is a book that offers additional interpretation to laws given in the first four books. Scripture scholars believe this passage was written long after Moses died, and the authors staged it as a se-

ries of three speeches made by Moses just before the Hebrews entered the promised land.

Moses had led the people out of bondage and then for forty difficult years in the desert. Now his work is done and he is summing up all of the laws they have been given as he looks across the Jordan to the promised land. The authors who wrote down these words were indicating what Moses had taught, and the lessons were that prophets didn't choose their role – they were called by God, and called to bring the people back to living the provisions of their covenant with God. Finally, the prophets spoke with God's authority so those who heard them were accountable to God.

The Biblical prophets were not trying to foretell the future. In fact the laws of Israel forbade all forms of foretelling the future by oracles or spells. They believed that only God could initiate communication between God and humanity.

So the connection to the gospel is the recognition of Jesus as a prophet who taught and acted by the authority given him by God.

Today's Gospel comes from Mark and is from chapter one of that Gospel. While Mark is the second gospel in the bible, almost all biblical scholars agree it was the first gospel written. His gospel is much more terse and plain than the others. Mark writes like he is simply writing down stories he has been told, while Matthew and Luke have more literary style. And Mark also writes with great urgency. As I mentioned this gospel is in Chapter one, but Mark has already covered the baptism of Jesus; the temptation in the desert; the beginning of his public ministry; and the call of the disciples. Almost every-

thing in the first two chapters of Mark is also found in Matthew and Luke – except for the story contained in today’s gospel which is only found in Luke. And today’s gospel is also the first miracle story in Mark.

I do want to emphasize that I believe the story is more about teaching with authority than it is about miracles. So what does Mark mean when he says Jesus taught with authority that was not like the scribes? We know the scribes dedicated their lives to the study of the Torah and claimed to be the official interpreters. The scribes relied on precedents set by interpretations of earlier teachers. What would have been striking to those gathered in that synagogue was that Jesus taught as one who had authority in his own right. He did not teach as “one of the scribes: who drew from earlier interpretations.

This is one of those passages that make me long to have been there that day. What did Jesus look like, and sound like? Just what kind of authority did he have?

What we do know is this: the synagogue on the Sabbath was the domain of the scribes, and they expected to be recognized as the authorities. Jesus was known as the son of an artisan, Joseph the carpenter. According to the code of that culture Jesus should not be seeking to be anything but an artisan.

But Jesus has now left Nazareth and has moved to Capernaum, one of the larger Jewish communities. The scribes were certain to be angry and feel threatened by this one appearing and teaching with real authority that the people could recognize and affirm.

I said earlier that I thought this passage was more about teaching with authority than about miracle but I do want to say a few words about the unclean spirit. This appears to be one of several stories in the first three chapters of Mark that are from an earlier collection of miracle stories that Mark edited and supplemented. We often get lost in whether

this was a miracle, or was it a case of mental illness, or epilepsy.

The story has elements of other healing stories. The person who needs healing approaches Jesus, and recognizes he is the holy one of God. When Jesus hears that he is known and recognized then the healing takes place.

Ched Myers suggests that the “unclean spirits” should be understood symbolically as referring to the scribal class. He notes that this is the opening scene of what he calls the Capernaum campaign, which begins with this confrontation with the religious authorities, and ends in Chapter 3 when Jesus cures the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath. He first asks if it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath and when there is no answer he takes action. Verse six says the scribes went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, and how to destroy him.

In Mark’s gospel you don’t have to wait until the last chapter. The picture is clear almost from the beginning. Once the religious authorities are confronted by teaching with real authority they recognize the threat to their dominion, and they take action. This aspect of Mark is always striking to me. Right from the beginning the authorities understand that something new has arrived and they must destroy it before the people become aware.

In fact, they succeed in that plan and they killed him like a criminal while he was only known in Israel. Yet after the resurrection the word of this prophet spread rapidly throughout the Roman empire. Did Jesus teach with real authority? How else would you explain the spread of his gospel in a few years through ordinary citizens despite persecution by the all-powerful Roman empire?

Did Jesus teach with real authority? Violence kills and keeps on killing . . . but love never dies.