

SPG#194, Epiphany 4B
February 1, 2009

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28

“Who do you say that I am?” was a question Jesus asked of his disciples after there had been some discussion about who others said that he was. His followers reported that others said he was Elijah or one of the prophets. It was at this point that he turned to his disciples and asked, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter then uttered his famous reply, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

In today’s gospel reading it is almost as if the writer is answering that question of who Jesus is. But typically for Mark, he does not answer the question directly. He does not say that God sent Jesus, born of a woman in Bethlehem, grew up in Nazareth, taught and performed miracles in Judea and Galilee, was crucified in Jerusalem and rose from death. Mark does not directly identify Jesus. Rather by what Jesus does in the reading Mark indicates that he had a special identity. He then leaves it to the reader to answer for him or herself who Jesus is. The setting of the reading is in the synagogue at Capernaum.

Capernaum, as you may recall, is on the north end of the Sea of Galilee. It was a fishing village, and reportedly the home of Peter and perhaps other disciples. The synagogue was up from the shore where it overlooked the village below. And Mark, in this passage, is trying to indicate who Jesus is in the synagogue by portraying him in two ways.

He portrays him as a teacher in the synagogues. And not only a teacher, but as one having authority. And secondly he portrays him as an exorcist, as he cast out an unclean spirit.

At the end the people are astonished, and Mark notes that **at once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.**

And so in that statement, there is an indication that Jesus will go to other villages and synagogues in the area as he teaches with authority and casts out unclean spirits.

The implication is that Jesus, by virtue of what he does, will indicate again and again, as he goes to still yet another village and another synagogue who he is. In other passages in Mark the identity of Jesus is indicated by teaching, by casting out unclean spirits, and by healing, and by praying.

In other words, as these followers moved from place to place with him, witnessing these occurrences: teaching, exorcisms, healings, and prayer, I expect there was a typical range of human responses to what they saw and heard. The behind the scenes discussions the followers had among themselves are mostly not recorded. But I expect that they were there. I expect that some of them were deeply and profoundly moved, even changed by what they witnessed. However, I expect that there were others who doubted and expressed skepticism at his claims. I can imagine one of them saying, "The healings, the exorcisms, and the teaching are quite impressive. But I am not going to agree that he is the Son of God. No one should claim to be God." And I expect that there were other things that were questioned and even denied. Today's gospel reading came from the debate within the communities of following. And far from some monolithic unanimity where everyone thought the same thing all the time, I am confident that there was difference of opinion and difference of faith experience in the communities.

Some interesting questions to ruminate on: Do you think people who doubted and questioned were excluded from the "main group?" Do you think that there were some people who witnessed the teachings, the exorcisms, and the healings, who knew Jesus very well, and were convinced that Jesus was not the Son of God?

It is for certain that the message of Jesus as Messiah would not have been delivered by the early church if there had been a majority of skeptics and doubters. But I am convinced that skeptics and doubters had a place in those early communities. For many followers, their hearts were warmed in the presence of Jesus. Many felt that presence. And they felt a fulfillment, a peace, a joy that they had never known

But more than likely there were others who doubted. And many of these are not written about. They were all part of those early and vital communities of faith that are our heritage in the church. And beyond obvious cultural differences between our times and the first century, the church today on a human level, is the same. And among us there are different shades of faith that make up this community. The diversity of heart and mind goes into the vitality of this community just as it did in the community of St. Mark. So, let us be delivered from seeing the communities of faith in the New Testament as monolithic, or all the same. And let us be delivered from seeing ourselves that way.

In the first century, via the Gospel of Mark, it was in this rhythm of coming and going in the villages and synagogues of Galilee that his followers, believers and doubters, wrestled with his identity.

And I would expect that different revelations and questions would come to them as they continued to follow him to the synagogues, continued to witness the teachings and the exorcisms.

And so it may be that as we read this reading that we may wonder and question about this Jesus Christ who taught and who cast out demons. And if we do wonder and question, we may consider reading the passage again.

And if we do, it may be that St. Mark will turn somersaults in heaven as he says, “Yes! Read the passage again!” or “Yes! Go to the next synagogue with Jesus.” And as we read for the 2nd time and the 3rd time and more, it may occur to us that we have a sense in the words of following him from town to town just like the disciples did.

For all of us, regardless of our vantage point, whether we are comfortable in the faith, or filled with doubts, we are always presented with the possibility of seeing Jesus in a new light.

And that is what Epiphany is all about. In a few minutes I will use the proper preface for Epiphany in the Eucharist found on page 378. It goes like this: *Because in the mystery of the Word made flesh, you have caused a new light to shine in our hearts, to give the knowledge of your glory in the face of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Seeing Jesus in a new light is what Epiphany is all about. Seeing Jesus in a new light might fill an empty spot that has been there for years. Or it may cause even more questions and doubts.

And so I commend this reading for all of us. And I invite you again into the circular world of St. Mark where as we read we eventually follow with others who follow. And as we follow we eventually know something new about him and about ourselves. We see him in a new light. We see ourselves in a new light.

May we have the courage and the commitment to accept St. Mark's invitation to do it again, to go to the next synagogue. And may the always new light of Christ shine in our hearts. Amen.