

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time B/2009

When I was a student in Belgium, I used to regularly go to eat with a family friend in an old restaurant founded around 1800, and which was outside the city of Brussels. What impressed me was the fact that this establishment had continued for years without interruption. Even though the personnel had changed and the building had undergone modifications and changes, the spirit of the founder was kept alive. That is how human institutions, as old as the states, function for years in fidelity to the spirit of the people and of their founding fathers.

What is true for human institutions is also true for the Church. When God chose Moses to lead his people out of slavery, he made him a powerful prophet and an outstanding spokesman of his Covenant with Israel. As a human being, Moses knew he was not immortal, that one day he would die. But the work for which he was instituted a leader and guide had to continue, for the glory of God's name and the good of his people.

It is in that sense of his mission that had to be continued after him that Moses speaks before the people in the first reading. He reminds Israel of the promise God made to him to raise another prophet like him in their midst. In fact, God had pledged to Moses that he would raise another prophet after him, that he would put his words in his mouth so that he might tell Israel what he commands.

Because what the prophet says comes from God, the people have to obey it and accept it. Otherwise those who do not listen will be accountable before God. On the other hand, given that this mission comes from God alone; nobody has the right to attribute to himself such an honor. Consequently, any prophet who presumes to speak in the name of God what he did not command him, or tries to speak in the name of another god, will be accountable, too.

This is a warning to each one of us who have a particular mission in the Church as preachers, catechists, teachers, etc. We have to be careful not to preach about our personal opinions about Christian truths, but the word of Jesus as given to us in the Bible and through the teaching of the Church. We better bring to people the word of Jesus and not our own words.

Coming back to what I stated before, I can say this: Although many prophets succeeded in Israel over the years and through the meander of Israel history, the people continued to hope that one day God would send a final prophet who would, once and for all, lead the people to the whole truth, and reconcile them with God and with one another. It is that circumstance that the idea of Messiah grew in Israel until Jesus fulfilled that promise.

As we heard in the Gospel, when Jesus came in the Synagogue of Capernaum on the Sabbath, he was certainly invested with the power and the authority of Moses, according to the promise of God. He spoke with such an authority that he was not like those who came before him. The reason why God invested him with power and authority was that he heals the wounds of the sins and restores to full health the sick.

In fact, where God's word breaks through in human history, announcing the coming of his kingdom of justice, love and peace, everything changes for the best and the reign of evil ceases existing. That is why Jesus heals, comforts the afflicted and casts out the demons. Jesus and the devil are like two enemies who meet at the social gathering. At first, they hate each other and try to ignore each other, but then inevitably confront each other.

The Gospel shows that when the possessed man was in the synagogue before Jesus came in, he was calm and looked normal like anyone else. Once Jesus entered and started speaking, he disclosed himself and confronted Jesus. This episode teaches us that any time the word of God is proclaimed in the assembly, it is like a powerful attack on the devil. This episode shows also that the word of God is capable of disclosing the secrets of the hearts of people.

If that is the case, it means that anytime we accept to listen to the word of Jesus with an open heart, it challenges us in our situations and behaviors. But, when we accept to let the word of Jesus guide us, it becomes like a lamp that sheds light on our acts and enlightens our situations as Jesus invites us to sincerely and humbly leave the sins behind us and come close to him. After all, what Jesus wants of us is just our conversion of heart and a close abiding in him.

It is in that sense we have to understand the recommendations of St Paul in today's second reading. First of all, St Paul acknowledges that a person who is unmarried is anxious about the things of the Lord, and how he or she has to please the Lord. In the same way, the one who is married is also anxious about the things of the world and how he or she has to please her or his partner.

After all, St Paul has no other motivation than to help Christians to live without anxiety, to put some priority in their lives and to adhere to Christ without distraction. In that sense, St Paul does not condemn marriage or despise sex as something inferior or belittles family life. On the contrary, he recognizes that to each one is given his or her gift that each has to live in total attachment to the Lord. If St Paul, however, happens to recommend celibacy, it is, insofar as it is a way of life, for those who are called to it. The reason for it is that it gives more freedom to be concerned with the things of the Lord, and no more.

If that is the case, then, the main challenge St Paul presents us is: how can we, live our lives, married or unmarried, in a total attachment to the Lord and give witness to others that the kingdom of God is our ultimate value in the middle of the changing things of this world? On this national day of prayer for African American family we ask God's blessing and peace upon all African families. We ask him also to give us the grace of listening to his word with an open heart and come to live our lives for the glory of his name. May God bless you!

Deuteronomy 18, 15-20; 1 Corinthians 7, 32-35; Mark 1, 21-28



Homily Date: February 1, 2009

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Document Name: 20090201homily.pdf