

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time B/2012

The readings of this Sunday talk about the mission of the servant of God and the way of fulfilling it. It highlights, in particular, the outcome of that mission and its demands.

The first reading of the book of Deuteronomy recalls the work of Moses in the midst of the people of Israel and what he did in order to assure the continuity of his ministry. In fact, when God chose Moses, he made him a powerful prophet and an outstanding spokesman of his Covenant. Because he was not immortal, Moses had to prepare someone to replace him so that the mission might be continued even after him.

That is what Moses reminds the people of Israel in his speech, namely that God will raise up another prophet like him in their midst. They have to listen to the prophet as they did to him. God will put his word in his mouth so that he may tell them what he commands. If, however, the people do not listen to him, they will be accountable before God. But, if, on the contrary, the prophet pretends to speak in the name of God what he did not tell him, he will be accountable too.

What is behind this text is, first of all, the idea that God's plan of salvation is permanent. Therefore, the succession of the prophetic office has to be assured so that God's salvation might reach the ends of the world. Another idea is that the validity of a prophecy and the salvation of a prophet depend on his sincerity to tell what God commands him and not on selling his own opinions.

It is the idea of the prophetic succession that has led to the messianic expectation in Israel and, thereby, to Jesus. And when the Gospel says that Jesus came in the synagogue and taught with authority, he presents himself as a legitimate successor of Moses, according to God's promise of raising up another prophet after Moses.

In that perspective, we understand why Jesus was not only admired for his teaching, but he was also able to set free those who were under the power of unclean spirits, like in the case of the man he heals in today's Gospel. As a matter of fact, the man who was possessed by the unclean spirit recognized Jesus as the Holy One of God. While the people were amazed, his fame spread everywhere throughout the region.

What do we learn from these texts? The first thing we learn is about the role of divine inspiration. Those who work for the Lord can be inspired by him in the sense that the Spirit of Lord is at the origin of what they say and teach to others. However, it can happen that instead of talking about what comes from God, they talk about their own opinion.

In that case, this text is a warning to all the preachers about the danger of preaching, not the word of Jesus as given to us in the Bible and the teaching of the Church, but their own opinions. That is why, it is important that the preachers bring to the people of God the word of Jesus and not their own words.

A second thing we learn is about God's authority. In fact, the Gospel says that Jesus was speaking with such an authority that he was not like those who came before him. Such an authority has nothing to do with the power of weapons that forces people to do things against their will or the strength of persuasion that seduces people and pushes them to act in one way or another.

God's authority, in truth, is the power that comes from the Spirit of God. It aims at healing the wounds of the sins and at restoring the integrity of the human person. That power is operating in all the sacraments by making Jesus present at all the times when the sacrament is celebrated. In that perspective, the one who speaks with authority does so because he is not alone, but he is acting through the assistance of God's power.

The last point I want to bring is about the role of Jesus with regard to the conception of disease and sickness. First of all, I have to say that each person is a man of his time. As we are men and women of our time, Jesus was also a man of his time.

In the time of Jesus, indeed, disease and sickness were closely related to the presence of bad spirits and demons. In that context, as Jesus was invested with the power of God, he was capable of detecting the bad spirits and cast them away. Today our conception of disease and sickness has evolved a lot. No one will easily link a sickness to the presence of bad spirits. If someone suddenly has a seizure, for instance, nobody will say that this person is under the influence of bad spirits. The evolution of medicine instead will lead us to talk about the dysfunction or a defect in the brain.

If that is the case today, then, there is a question: What role does Jesus still play in our lives, especially with regard to the present understanding of disease and sickness? Is he still the Son of God who takes away the sins of the world and who heals us?

The answer to this question is very simple. In fact, according to the Letter to the Hebrews (13: 8), "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever". In that sense, what has changed is not the person of Jesus, but the circumstances of time and a space in which we live. As he was healing in the past, Jesus continues to heal today, but according to our environment and the circumstances of our time.

However, in spite of the changing conditions of the world, a man of God has to keep believing in Jesus and set his heart on the things of above. It is this consideration that pushes St Paul to recommend that a servant of God, married or unmarried, has to live 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.

In this consideration, St Paul does not at all condemn marriage or despise sex as something inferior; nor does he belittle family life. What he wants is that we come to give priority to Christ in our lives without anxiety or distraction, according to the gift each one of us has received from the Lord. Let us pray, then, that the Lord may help us to adhere to him without reservation or distraction. Let us pray for those who are responsible for our Church so that the Lord may bless them as they continue the work of salvation the Lord has left us. May God bless you all!

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



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