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Homily for Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

2018-01-28

Year B: Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Ps 95; 1 Corinthians 7:32-35; Mark 1:21-28

St. Eugenia Catholic Church, Stockholm (English Mass)

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

At Sunday Mass, the first reading and the gospel passage are often connected in some way. This Sunday they are more closely connected than usual. In the first reading from the Book of Deuteronomy we heard God giving his promise that after Moses, the greatest leader in the history of the people of Israel, God “will raise up a prophet like” Moses. This prophet, we also heard, will speak God’s own words from “his mouth”. Ancient Jews understood this as a promise about someone with a closeness to God greater than the one Moses had, recalling that Moses had been speaking “face to face” with God, as one human speaks to another.

Let us now go to the gospel, quoting Jesus’s first public homily in Capernaum. We hear how people perceived that “he taught them with authority”. St. Mark adds: “unlike the scribes”, because all religious teachers always tried to relate their teaching to Moses, through whom God had mediated his Law and his covenant with the Jewish people. But Jesus does not need to invoke Moses or to lean against any theological interpretation. And this is ultimately revealed by the Greek word, used in the original text, for “authority”: “ex ousia”, meaning “out of essence”. I.e. Jesus speaks out of who he really is, by his very nature: God. He speaks God’s words from “his mouth” as the first reading promised. And people understand they are experiencing something completely unique.

When another evangelist, St. John, writes that the Son “who is in the bosom of the Father” has made the Father known to us, he means exactly what we just encountered. Jesus’s teaching through words and deeds is the teaching of the Father; of God. So we understand why the Son in the Holy Trinity also is identified with “the Word”. And thus we realise, as the people of Capernaum, that we are not dealing with an interpretation of the truth, not a piece of the truth but the truth; truth itself; in full; the idea creating the whole universe now has become flesh, matter, part of it, to lead it out of humanity’s self imposed destructiveness. Truth is not an abstract idea. Truth is a person, who speaks to peoples’ hearts, be it a call to conversion, which can be met by affirmation or rejection, or an exhortation to carry on with an upright life.

Before Jesus Christ and his claim to be God united with man, i.e. the embodiment of truth, there can be no neutrality. Everyone must take a stand: either Jesus is who he claimed to be and whom the historical sources and eyewitnesses testify about; or he is a fraud. And if he is a fraud, then the most common attitude of “I-don’t-want-to-take-a-stand-but-Jesus’s-teaching-on-love-and-peace-is-great” actually falls, because one cannot trust a fraud. But if he isn’t a fraud, then the words of the Apostle Paul in our second reading from his First letter to the Corinthians, must be our only guiding star in life: i.e. “to give” our “undivided attention” to him, “the Lord”. Or with the words of our responsorial psalm: from “today” we must “listen to his voice!” Because then our lives fully belong to him!

The demons, all that is contrary to the truth, on their part definitely acknowledge who Jesus really is, as the gospel told. The powerlessness of lies and self-deceit is revealed in the presence of truth. One of the major deceits of our time is that everything is opinion. That everyone's got his or her "truth" and that questioning this would be judgmental. This attitude, however, loses sight of the fact that there is a truth to everything and that we are called to seek it and understand it in order to embrace it in our lives. The attitude of relativism does not only reject faith as something else than private feelgood, namely a response to God's call through Jesus Christ, a response which has consequences for all we say and do; it also diminishes the scope of reason.

When the Catholic Church proclaims the truth about God and the human person, in matters regarding e.g. the dignity of human life from conception to natural death, marriage and family and justice, she causes great indignation in our contemporary culture. Perhaps this is the loud cry of the demons of our time, who want to be left alone. The devil and his demons – and Jesus confirms all the time that they are real, not merely symbols! – want to reject any claim of truth because they want to separate us from God. Therefore we must ask for strength to remain in the truth ourselves and for less abashment in showing others the truth. For this we are above all helped by three things:

First, by staying close to Christ. It was because he stayed close to Christ that the man in the synagogue in the gospel was freed from the demon. Especially through regular prayer, also if just a few minutes in the morning and the evening, and through the Holy Eucharist, we increase our closeness to him who really matters.

Second, by staying close to what draws us more into the truth. The main weapon of the devil and his demons is to manipulate our selfish tendencies by lies and half-truths. That is why they want us out of the confessional. Confession is the gift of truth. We face the truth about ourselves by confessing our sins, failures and weaknesses. And God, through the priest, reminds us of his truth: mercy, forgiveness, unconditional grace. Confession unleashes the light and resets us for the right path; as often as we need.

Third, we are helped by staying close to others in need. The devil is the lord of selfishness; Christ is the Lord of self-giving love without any claims of returns. When we resist our selfishness by serving others, whatever their need may be and whatever we think of them, we weaken the demonic influence in our lives. Start with them closest to you, particularly those with whom you perhaps have issues but whose darkness would be dispersed and lives truly renewed if just you made a call, a visit, an unexpected sign of charity.

Every Christian is actually a spiritual warrior. But to be able to fight the battle, we need all disordered pieces of our lives put back together. As Jesus today in this Mass renews his commitment to us, and his call to allow him to put our lives in order, let us renew our commitment to allow him doing it; so that he, the truth made man and always present in the world through his Church, can do his work more completely through us. Amen.