

4th Sunday of the Year (B)

January 28, 2018

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

1 Corinthians 7:32-35

Mark 1:21-28

Most of us remember the comedian George Burns and his wife Gracie Allen. They were first on the radio and then television. And there was that memorable film, *Oh, God!*, where George Burns portrayed God. George once said that a sermon must have a good beginning and a good ending and that the two should be close together. When Gracie died, George found among her papers this quote: "Never place a period where God has placed a comma!" So often we preachers and homilists in the Church like to place a period after every sentence even though a comma might be more appropriate. Faith and belief, growing in spiritual life and nurturing a relationship with the Lord, most often calls for a comma and not a period. The importance of dogmas and doctrines must be balanced with a relationship that is open to change and growth. The psalm response urges us not to "harden the heart."

We are in the year of Mark's gospel and on this fourth Sunday, we are still in chapter one. The question that the gospel poses seems to surround the person and identity of Jesus, who is he and what are we to make of him. We might think we can answer that question with little difficulty but I would suggest that we must be careful not to fall into the temptation of certitude. We have come to know enough about Jesus that we have made a baptismal commitment to walk with him, to take hold of his gospel, and to live the gospel as faithfully as we can. Yet, as we grow and experience life, we are continually learning who he is, what he is about, and what our lives are to be about. This is the difference between the "period" and the "comma."

According to this gospel passage today, Jesus taught in a way that was so impressive that it conveyed authority. Mark's gospel does not tell us what he taught on that occasion in the synagogue, but he seems to care more about how powerful the words were. "He taught them as one having authority!" We might focus for a moment on that idea of authority and ponder what they were hearing and experiencing that seemed so different. The people were quite familiar with authority that came with an office such as the scribes who were the learned people of the day. They could cite scripture passages and quote the laws and the rabbis to support their teachings. Yet, we know that the prophets in the Old Testament, described in the first lesson, were for the most part without any office, they were simply ordinary people, farmers and vine-dressers. The Spirit of the Lord would come upon them and they would speak with authority. And so, here

is the difference between the authority that comes from an office or position and the authority that is genuine. For the people gathered, Jesus was the real thing...he was filled with wisdom and integrity, he had a relationship with God.

And so, this carpenter from Nazareth, a dusty backwater place, walks into the synagogue and begins to teach. He is not a member of the Sanhedrin, he is not a judge or a priest, and yet he speaks as one who does indeed know something about God. The people resonated with the truth that he conveyed by his presence and his words. Filled with wonder and surprise, his presence evokes questions about his identity, and then there is a scuffle and a man out of control, or a man under the control of a demonic spirit. Surprisingly, this man or, more precisely, this demonic spirit knows Jesus. He declares "You are the Holy One of God." Jesus silences the loud and obnoxious spirit and sends it away, giving the man his freedom. We hear nothing more about the man but the whole region around Galilee hears about what happened to the man. Jesus backs up his words and powerful presence with an action that speaks of healing, reconciliation, and freedom.

In Jesus, the people were touched by the divine. Something of God had come to them and they were not quite sure how they ought to respond. This is the very question for you and for me to day! We do not want to place a period where God might well have intended a comma. This journey of faith is meant to be dynamic, filled with surprises and the unexpected.

Our parish has for many years now, provided the booklet *At Home with the Word*. This is a wonderful resource that you can keep next to your bible. There is an introduction to the gospel of Mark, the gospel of John, and the letters of St. Paul. For each Sunday of the year you have the scripture lessons, Scripture Insights (a reflection), and a Practice of Faith. If you have not yet picked up a copy, I urge you to do so. It will help you grow in your understanding of the sacred word, and in your relationship with the Lord.