

Deut. 18:15-20 Psalm 111 1 Cor 8: 1-13 Mark 1:21-28

“Give me Oh Lord my God, understanding to know you, diligence to seek you, wisdom to find you, and a faithfulness that may finally embrace you. “ Thomas Aquinas

“If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire I will die.”

These are the words of Moses the prophet in our OT reading. The people of God have experienced the unmediated presence of God at Horeb, and they know they can't bear it again, Moses can't bear it again, the unveiled presence of God is just too scary, so from now on it must be mediated through other human agencies. Moses reminds them of God's promise:

“I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet who shall speak to them of everything that I command.”( Deut. 18:15)

In the season of Epiphany we are celebrating God's self revelation that culminates in Jesus. For us, of course, that prophet is Jesus and we see him in the Gospel teaching with authority direct from God “not as the scribes” who rely on holy books and their long tradition. More about the Gospel in a minute but first a bit more on Deuteronomy and psalm 111 chosen by the lectionary makers as a response.

The Deuteronomy passage is part of Moses' final speech to his people before he dies and they prepare to enter the Promised Land. He warns them about following false gods, even some priests were doing it, consulting soothsayers or sacrificing to idols. (It was still happening in the church at Corinth several centuries later) The he reminds them of God's promise of a true prophet. (and there were several like Isaiah and Micah who followed Moses and also pointed to Jesus)

Psalm 111 is a hymn of praise. It recounts the saving work of God through the Exodus experience – God gives food, provides Israel with its land and brings redemption. At the heart of God's actions are truth, mercy and faithfulness. For us today the crux is the last verse : “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, all those who practise it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever.”

It's part of being human to reach out beyond ourselves to a higher being and there are many ways we can touch the infinite, the transcendent, the mystery, this something we can never put into words or grasp with our brain.

My husband, Peter was a scientist who no longer practised his Anglican faith but he told me one day that the deeper you go into understanding how the world works, the more you know deep down that God exists. There must be something more than human beings can comprehend or make ... it's a mystery!

It's this mystery that's so attractive, so sublime, so beautiful and so awesome – we can find it in the beauty of nature, a sunset, a beautiful view of mountains or sea, walking in the bush or by the lake. Some people find it in a painting or in a divine piece of music. We can experience the transcendent in the majestic soaring architecture of a great cathedral or in a little hidden church in the hills. We connect with mystery in worship – beautiful symbols, dance or singing. We find it in prayer, in bread and wine and in the “still small voice of calm”

Some people seek it in drugs, in alcohol or in speed – anything that takes them out of themselves – but these things, like all addictions, are evil forces. In Jesus' world people spoke of “demonic possession” which controlled them from within, which robbed them of freedom of choice, stunted their human growth and alienated them from God, from community, and from themselves. This is the dark force which Jesus released people from.

Yet in Mark chapter 1 it is only the man with the unclean spirit who recognises Jesus. It is as though his illness has scraped away layers of blindness and insensitivity so that he is aware of God's presence in a way no one else is. He yells “What have you to do with us Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” (Mark 1:24) The demon knows instinctively that Jesus will destroy it, for it is stopping the man relating to God. Jesus says in effect “Shut up! Come out and leave that poor man alone!” And such is the authority of Jesus that the spirit obeys and the man is calm again.

Jesus is the Holy One of God, the One to whom the Father said “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” (Mark 1:11) This miracle story declares his full identity, demonstrates his divine authority, and defines his teaching with power. Mark's story carries the subtle but profound message that knowing about Jesus is not the same as experiencing his liberating power. Jesus' teaching becomes effective in the transformation of human life, no merely in being repeated or discussed. Jesus is the new prophet, the one sent so that we might believe and have life in his name. Through him we hear the voice of God just as he promised to Moses: “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people. I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet who shall speak to them everything that I command.”

Thomas Troeger, an American minister and hymn writer wrote a poem based on this gospel reading. I end with verses 1 and 3 of “Silence! Frenzied, Unclean Spirit” (P 144 in Borrowed Light, Hymn texts, prayers and poems. OUP New York 1994)

“Silence! Frenzied, unclean spirit,”  
cried God's healing, holy One.  
“Cease your ranting!  
Flesh can't bear it.  
Flee as night before the sun.”  
At Christ's voice the demon trembled,  
from its victim madly rushed,  
while the crowd that was assembled  
stood in wonder, stunned and hushed

Silence, Lord, the unclean spirit  
in our mind and in our heart.  
Speak your word that when we hear it  
all our demons shall depart.  
Clear our thought and calm our feeling,  
still the fractured, warring soul.  
By the power of your healing  
make us faithful, true and whole.