

the one thing needful
a sermon preached on the
fourth sunday after epiphany
28 January 2018
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by father ken hewlett

the lections: Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

Almost every time Christians gather together for worship the scriptures are read but the antiquity of the scriptures and the enormous changes that have taken place since they were written, sets both the preacher and the congregation a considerable problem. At a first glance the three readings this morning seem unpromising.

The first reading from Deuteronomy are words attributed to Moses. The passage ends with a warning to inattentive people who failed to listen to God's word, spoken by the prophet, but also there is a warning to any prophet who presumed to speak in God's name, when in fact God had not sent him. The chief point of the passage was that sooner or later God would raise us another prophet like Moses, who would speak God's word and act with God's authority, as Moses had done.

The Jews were forever expecting second coming, repeat performances; a second Moses to lay down the law, a second David to re-establish the Israelite empire; a second Elijah to turn the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just. But these pipe dreams were never fulfilled, and it is hard to see how they could be.

When John the Baptist was asked 'Are you the prophet?' meaning the prophet referred to in today's first reading-he answered, 'No'. Well then, was Jesus the fulfilment of that promise, as some of the early Christians believed? Jesus certainly spoke God's word and acted with God's authority but he certainly wasn't a Moses replica. His approach was different, and he dared to criticise Moses, even questioning the adequacy of the Ten Commandments. 'It was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder' and 'Do not commit adultery', but I tell you do not give way to anger, do not give way to lust.' Jews who were looking for a second Moses must have been sadly disappointed in Jesus. He was the exponent of a different kind of law.

What did you make of today's gospel reading? Jesus goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath; on arrival he begins to teach. Mark tells us nothing about the content of his teaching - he simply records its effect on the congregation. They are amazed, god-smacked, not just by what Jesus says, but by the authority by which he says it, so different from the scribes, the teachers of the law. They parroted traditions, toed the orthodox line, never ventured a personal opinion. But Jesus clearly knows what he is talking about and speaks authoritatively, as an authentic mouthpiece of God. But his teaching, his sermon, is interrupted. By a deeply distressed person - Mark says that he was possessed by an unclean spirit - cries out, accusing Jesus of having come to destroy him, and calling Jesus the Holy One of God. Here is a confrontation between Good and Evil, and evil has met its match. Jesus first silences the man; 'Be quiet' he says literally, 'Be muzzled' in everyday talk - 'Shut up' then he orders the evil spirit to come out, and the spirit reluctantly obeys. The people are even more amazed by this authoritative act than they had been of his authoritative teaching. Notice in this early stage of Jesus ministry, Jesus isn't criticised for healing on the Sabbath, even though this was against the law.

Most likely we moderns, who know so much about diseases of the mind and of the body, feel uncomfortable with this first century stuff about demon possession. Either we

dismiss it as a false explanation of what was happening, or we admit that there is indeed a demonic element in the world and in some human hearts and minds. When we hear of acts of inhumanity amongst the human family, and when we see vivid examples of it on our television screens, the dreadful things people do to each other, and the passion with which they do them, we begin to wonder whether demon possession isn't perhaps the likeliest explanation we can offer at the beginning of the 21st century – and perhaps the best excuse available to those who commit such crimes.

In the midst of this tragic situation, Jesus stands among us, now as then. And now as then, the power of the Lord is with him to heal. His spirit can save people from such evil passions as hatred, anger, and greed; can mend broken hearts, restore damaged souls; can renew our diseased and sinful selves, and make us whole. To quote a verse from one of Frederick Pratt Green's hymns:

*From every ailment flesh endures
Our bodies clamour to be freed;
Yet in our hearts we would confess
That wholeness is our deepest need.*

Finally in the second reading we are confronted with the dilemma; to eat or not to eat that is the question. This is not a matter of health or hygiene, but a religious matter a matter of conscience. Can Christians eat meat previously offered to idols in a pagan temple, or not? In fact many of the Christians in Corinth did so with a clear conscience, knowing that these gods did not exist, that they weren't real, and could do them no harm. Paul agrees with this but says, "Watch it! It may not do you any harm, but it may harm a fellow Christian who still has lingering belief in the existence of the pagan gods represented by these idols"

All of this seems to be totally irrelevant to us, and pretty unimportant. Paul goes on about it for some time and at some length, and we wish he wouldn't; but amidst his tortuous arguments he includes several pearls of wisdom. Let us pick up on one of them; "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" – an apostolic epigram. Paul isn't against knowledge, far from it, but he does recognise the limitations and dangers of knowledge. Later in this letter he points out that "we know only in part" that is, our knowledge is incomplete, and we can never see the whole picture. And the possession of knowledge can breed conceit, and a lofty contempt for those who do not possess it. He warns these "know alls" at Corinth not to think too highly of themselves, nor to look down on people less clever, less informed, than they are. "Knowledge puffs up" tends to inflate the ego – "but love builds up" strengthens the church, ensures its unity, and is after all, the one thing needful.