

## Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

Deuteronomy 18:15-20 and Mark 1:21-28

The failed coup attempt on Congress earlier this month compels us to examine how we decide what information to pay attention to and to whom we look for truth. We have been playing fast and loose with these questions for quite a while as a culture. In entertainment, we blurred the lines between truth and fantasy when we began watching "reality TV." In ethics, we allowed ourselves to believe that there is no such thing as absolute truth, since no one can know it in this lifetime. Consequently, we decided it is only fair to let everyone decide what is right for themselves. Meanwhile, the Internet presents all viewpoints as equally valid and overwhelmingly offers us an information explosion 24/7/365.

The coup attempt on Congress showed us where the disintegration of our yardstick for truth has led. Thankfully, many social media platforms have finally chosen to shoulder their responsibility for oversight of people's posts. Our task is to determine what you and I, as individuals and as members of communities, must do to better identify what is true and who are reliable spokespersons for truth.

The coup attempt proves this is not an academic question. Our knowledge of the truth determines how we vote, how we spend our money and our time, which values we use to make life choices and how we build community with others. So, for example, a world built on "All people are created equal" looks very different from a world built on "Some people are more equal than others."

These questions about truth and who speaks it are not new. The Bible is filled with human beings struggling with those same questions. In our first reading, the Israelites are worried because Moses is not going to live forever. He has connected them to God in a phenomenal way: "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face" (Dt 34:10). But the Israelites know they will need someone new to continue to help them interpret the covenant and the Law. In verses 9-14, God clearly stated that using fortune-tellers and séances, as well as sacrificing your children to guarantee God will do what you want, is unacceptable. These practices are forms of magic, the control of the divine through ritual actions, and you cannot be in a covenant with someone you are trying to control. God wants a loving relationship with Israel, with the healthy trust and communication intrinsic to love. God, the new prophet and Israel must each live up to certain responsibilities. First, God must be so intimate with the prophet that God "will put my words in his mouth." Second, the Israelites must trust and obey this prophet or, God declares, "I myself will make them answer for it." Third, the prophet must be faithful to God: if the prophet makes things up or speaks for other gods, the relationship is ended and he will die. Extreme? No, a genuine relationship with God is essential for speaking and receiving the truth.

In the gospel, Jesus is beginning his ministry and people are wondering whether he is worth listening to. Mark shows Jesus teaching in a synagogue. The synagogue was the place Jews went to hear the truth, taught by scribes who had studied the Law and the rich tradition of interpreting it. Scribes got respect by referring to their own teachers, but Mark wants us to wonder about the scribes' relationship with God. Were they relying on others' relationship with God or did they have one of their own?

Frequently, Mark says, "Jesus taught" but then presents Jesus doing something, because, for Mark, the action is the teaching. Here Jesus teaches that he is able to defeat evil with merely a command. The evil spirit calls him "the Holy One of God." Dang, those credentials are even better than Moses'! Mark has laid out Jesus' intimate relationship with God. We need have no qualms about following him.

Okay, awesome displays of power are well and good, but does this truth have any practical implications for our choices here and now? Indeed! When Jesus, who has been invested with all this awesome power, acts, he chooses to end the suffering and darkness of another person. That is our yardstick, plain and simple. Always, always, choose compassion; it is what God does and who God is.

- ❖ Who are your sources for news and information? How much compassion is there in these people?
- ❖ Who has shown you compassion? What have you learned from those experiences?

©01/27/2021, Bernadette Rudolph