

Reflection, Sunday 31st January 2021
Deuteronomy 18; 15-20 Mark 1; 21-28

What is this?

What is this? It is both a very interesting question and very challenging one, at the same time. And how we respond will set the tone of what follows, and I don't mean what follows now, but what follows in life.

Deuteronomy is the collection of writings that present the law for the second time, this time after the people of God have been exiled in Babylon, where they have been confronted with other gods, other lifestyles, and so are reminded that God's ways are different, and they have been called to be faithful to the view that God presents. This happens as they return "home" in a similar fashion as when the people were just coming to the end of the long march to the promised land. It sets out the way things should be following God's vision for the people: the priests, the king, the prophets. What should be done, and what should not be done. Because God's will **is** the centre of the people's life. And today's reading speaks about "a prophet that will come, raised by God". And how will the people know the prophet comes from God, and not be a false prophet? If what he says proves true or if it doesn't. The prophet will be a constant reminder of the fullness of life God wishes for the people.

It is this which will inspire the ministry of Jesus – he will speak the will of God and those spoken words will be shown to be true, they will change things and in doing so will remind the people what God has established. And Jesus will take things a step further, when opening the Kingdom in a way that would not have been expected in the times of Moses. So today we ask for the first time: **What is this?** And we will come back to the question in a few moments.

And connected to the Deuteronomy reading we face Mark, still the first chapter of this Gospel – so very much the beginnings of the ministry of Jesus, where everything is new, happening for the first time, for both Jesus and the people. And for all – remember this is the first Gospel to be put in writing, about the time the Romans had invaded Israel and destroyed the Temple and pillaged it, about the year 70, as can be seen on the Arch of Titus in Rome; this Gospel's 'targeted audience' are the new believers that come from a gentile background.

One of the first things we read in Mark about Jesus' public ministry is that he is different from anything they have heard before: "*he teaches with authority, not as the scribes*". Well, that will not make the scribes happy we know. Having said that, Mark then follows up with a clear example:

- In the town synagogue this man with an unclean spirit makes an appearance. Such a person was most unwelcome to be part of the community, such a person was considered a disturbing presence. And though what was "unclean" was the spirit that has possessed him, it was the person who was seen as unclean. And this is the first time we read of Jesus been called "the Holy One of God" by anybody other than the Spirit of God itself. This unclean spirit not only recognized Jesus, but also felt threatened by him.

More than any other gospel, Mark makes a point of Jesus' healing miracles and exorcisms. Those who have studied this gospel in detail tell us that practically 1/3 of the verses of the Gospel are about these miracles. The words of Jesus transform lives, things happen; and this takes us instantly back to the reading in Deuteronomy: words that prove to be true. Jesus expels this unclean spirit, and the people are amazed. And here we have the second time where we ask ourselves: ***What is this?***

So far, this question - ***What is this?*** is a biblical question that reaches us as a result of what Moses tells the people and as a result of Jesus' actions; but when was the last time we dedicated anytime to it? How does this question challenge us for the times we are living? How does our considering that question change us and bring us closer to Kingdom?

Jesus has a totally different form of authority; one we cannot identify with what goes on in the world today. Jesus' words and ministry are liberating, giving fullness of life to all people, whether they were women or men, whether they were those the religious authority of the time considered sinners, unclean, or foreigners unworthy of God's love. Jesus' ministry was one of justice, and reconciliation and hope. Jesus' ministry involved him personally as he touched lepers, sat with tax collectors, was rebuked by the Canaanite (=foreign) woman (Mat 15;27), or the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4) who becomes an evangelist -sharing the good news. Jesus reached out to those in need, in a way that people felt was different, new. No wonder the people asked ***What is this?***

My hope for us all is that we too will ask such a question. I often feel that as churches we have just grown accustomed to all this, and we are no longer surprised; there is nothing that amazes us; and when our faith doesn't amaze us any longer, we are in danger falling into a routine, empty of change, empty of life, empty of hope.

I don't want to make too much of the matter of exorcisms, Jesus does a lot of other things as well. My hope is that we will re-discover Jesus as the one who presents to us the meaning of life in fullness for all people. And this is so necessary in the times we live - as COVID has increased the needs, which we can deal with: think of the loneliness, the isolation, mental health difficulties, homeless people, discrimination that so many suffer; the Food-Banks, Shelter housing, the work of Christians Against Poverty, and I could go on and on.... And always the same old question: ***What is this?***

We should always remember that we are "***one world and one human family***", as the World Council of Churches reminded us this week. We must be part of the plan God has for these times, when our words should be true, transformative, hope giving, life enhancing. We too can make a difference. People should still be amazed, and see great things happening. I am convinced that this is why Mark began the Gospel the way he did. He is showing us what is to come, and today we are part of that journey. All this becomes the answer to today's question: ***What is this?*** Let us give thanks to God for being asked to be part of this.

<p><u>Prayer:</u> Loving, Caring God; your love for your people knows no limits, please teach us to love all others with all our heart, with all our strength; that our love may be not only good words but also transforming actions of justice, of love, of service - to all. We pray in the name of Jesus and through the power of the Spirit of New Life. Amen</p>
