

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time – January 28, 2024

Readings: Dt 18:15–20 • Ps 95:1–2, 6–7, 7–9 • 1 Cor 7:32–35 • Mk 1:21–28 bible.usccb.org/bible/readings/012824.cfm

Almost all disagreements in theological matters come down to authority. When something about God or His will for us is unclear, who or what has the final word? In Christianity and Judaism, God has always raised up certain people as His representatives who speak authoritatively on His behalf. He usually gives clear signs that authenticate the authority of these representatives. The most common sign is the working of miracles.

Clearly, this was the case for Moses. The Israelites believed Moses when he relayed God's words to them because they witnessed firsthand how God used Him in supernatural ways. The idea of God choosing to speak to a very small number of people who in turn are given authority over everyone else can be offensive to our modern sensibilities of democracy and egalitarianism. Already at the time of Moses, it was not easy for people to accept. Even Aaron and Miriam, who served God alongside Moses, once became indignant and complained, "Is it through Moses alone that the Lord has spoken? Has he not spoken through us also?" (Num 12:2).

Of course, in principle, God can speak to anyone, and He does speak to us all in various ways. The problem is that when everyone believes that they have equal access to God's revelation and do not need anyone else, chaos ensues. This is the problem with the Protestant Reformers and their notion of "*sola Scriptura*" (Scripture alone). This idea was supposed to embrace Scripture as the only authority for understanding the Faith. In practice, however, history has shown that "Scripture alone" inevitably devolves into each person being his or her own Magisterium. God knows that we need human authorities, and so throughout salvation history, He has provided them. Of course, they are always imperfect, and Moses himself was no exception. But the sins and flaws of God's representatives never give us the right to ignore them. God Himself says, "Whoever will not listen to my words which he speaks in my name, I myself will make him answer for it."

The prophets did not only speak on God's behalf. They also received unique revelation of Him. A person has authority to speak for God in proportion to how much He has revealed to him. Thus it is no accident that Moses was the most authoritative prophet in the Old Testament, for Scripture describes says this of him: "The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a person speaks to a friend" (Ex 33:11). No one else after Moses had this kind of relationship with God, and so no one else had his authority. But in the first reading, God promised to Moses, "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their kin."

Jesus Christ fulfills this promise — he is the prophet like Moses, the one who speaks to God face to face. As the beginning of the Letter to the Hebrews says, "In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a son"

(Heb 1:1–2). In the Bread of Life discourse, Christ himself says, “Everyone who listens to my Father and learns from him comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father” (Jn 6:45–46). Christ claims to reveal God and speak authoritatively for God in a completely unprecedented way. Because of this, in a way very similar to the Old Testament prophets, Christ performed signs and wonders that authenticated his teachings and claims. He did not merely speak eloquently or try to persuade people with arguments. Instead, he perfectly revealed God by both words and deeds, proclamation and demonstration.

Our Gospel reading today is a classic example. When Christ was teaching in the synagogue, the people were already marveling at the authority with which he spoke, which was so different from how the scribes taught them. As if trying to undermine this teaching authority, a demoniac disrupts him by crying out and causing a scene. Christ immediately exorcizes the demon, which naturally amazes everyone and makes them wonder, “What is this? A new teaching with authority.” Christ had already impressed them by the authority of his words, and now he confirms this authority by his deeds. Christ reveals the Father by words and deeds. He is the epitome of authenticity: what he says and does perfectly coincides with who he is.

In the Church today, people rightly demand authenticity from Church leaders as those who represent God and speak on His behalf. People have a right to demand that those who teach about God actually know Him and spend time with Him in prayer, speaking to Him “as a person speaks to a friend.” Authority of office is real and important, and we cannot ignore or dismiss it. But in order to be effective, authority of office must be complemented by authority of experience and authority of charism. In other words, a person must really know and love God in order to speak of Him authoritatively. As much as we rightly expect this authenticity from our Church leaders and pray for them to have it, do we ourselves sincerely pursue the Lord? Do we have a disposition of humble obedience to those the Lord has given us as His representatives on earth? We cannot wait until these men are perfect before we will follow them. In the words of St. Paul, God gives us His treasure in clay vessels (2 Cor 4:7). None of us possesses the full revelation of who God is and what He wills. Our only choice is to humble ourselves and allow God to teach, feed, and protect us through His Church. Only in heaven, when we have finally been prepared to see God, will we no longer need mediators.

And so, in closing, St. Paul reassures us, “We know partially and we prophesy partially, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. [. . .] At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully, as I am fully known” (1 Cor 13:9–10, 12).