

Homily, 28 January 2018
Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalms 95:1-2,6-7,7-9; 1 Corinthians 7:32-35; Mark 1:21-28



*He taught them as one having authority
If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts*



The ancient Jews who followed Moses out of the land of Egypt had a great fear of the Lord. "*Let us not again hear the voice of the Lord, lest we die,*" they said.

It echoes what God says to Moses in the Book of Exodus:

"But you cannot see my face," God said to Moses, "for no one can see me and live. When my glory passes I will set you in the cleft of the rock and will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand, so that you may see my back; but my face may not be seen."

To say that they "feared God," is not to say that they believed God was wrathful or capricious, but rather that his power and majesty were so beyond them that they simply couldn't bear his direct presence.

Indeed, there are people in Old Testament who do see God's face and do not die, though they are amazed that such a thing could happen. And how could someone who was afraid of God say in the Psalms:

*Lord, you have probed me, you know me: you know when I sit and stand;
you understand my thoughts from afar. You formed my inmost being;
you knit me in my mother's womb. I praise you, because I am
wonderfully made; wonderful are your works!*

They feared the Lord because of his glory and majesty and power. Because of their awe and their reverence for God, they knew they needed a buffer, something to mediate the direct presence of God. In other words, they needed a Sacrament.

Aware of his peoples need, God came to them -- and to us -- in the mystery of the Incarnation. Jesus, the Son of God and the son of Mary, is the first sacrament, the spring from which all the other sacraments flow.



In today's Gospel passage from Mark, the people have their first encounter with Jesus, the Sacramental presence of God. But given Mark's way of writing, it's easy to miss what it was that startled them about Jesus. It wasn't the casting out of demons, that was amazing, but secondary. Listen again:

Then Jesus and his first disciples came to Capernaum, and on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught.

The people were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes.

All were amazed and asked one another, "What is this? A new teaching with authority. He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him."

In very beginning of his Gospel, John makes the very same point as Mark, but in very different words:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."



And that's the challenge of a Sacrament: we have to ask ourselves, "*what is this?*" We have to perceive in an ordinary sign that the love of God, that divine life, is somehow in that thing, transforming it in some mysterious way.

It is by faith that we see the bread, but discern the body, that we see the man, but discern the second person of the Trinity.



Why does God come to us in the sacraments? Is it because he is trying to trick us, trying to make it hard for us? No! Of course not! God doesn't hide from us.

Each of us is made in God's image, and deep within us God has planted the seed of faith. Without it how could St. Paul say: "*Ever since the creation of the world, God's invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what he has made.*"

God is not hidden, but we have to perceive him with our hearts, with the eyes of faith.

And so it is that he gives us the sacraments. He doesn't want to overwhelm or overpower us: "... *for no one can see me and live.*" The Sacraments are the invitation of a loving and patient God.



Years ago, when I was in college or maybe even high school, I remember hearing someone say that our faith in Christ comes to us much easier than it did to those first Christians.

He pointed out that they were not raised in the faith, they had no New Testament, no Tradition, to tell them that this thirty-year-old carpenter, this son of Joseph and Mary, was the Son of God. And so, he argued, theirs was the harder task.

Years later, I'm not so sure that's right. Every generation, every person who hears the Gospel must ask himself "*What is this?*"

Though we hear it with our ears, we must perceive it with our hearts. Perhaps this week we might reflect on the words of the psalm: "*If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.*"