Homily – 4th Sunday in Ord. Time (B)

*Dt. 18: 15-20; 1.Cor. 7:32-35 & Mk. 1: 21-28*

Last Tuesday evening at our Formal Hall, I had the great pleasure of sitting next to Dr Brian Klug, one of our two Jewish Fellows and a philosopher. He is always fascinating company, and whenever we sit next to each other, somehow the conversation always turns to the Scriptures – Jewish and Christian. Since he was preparing a talk for Holocaust Memorial Day, we ended up discussing the power of words, and he noted just how powerful he felt the first few lines of the book of Genesis are. God speaks – in Hebrew: *Dabar* – and there is light. God speaks – and the whole of Creation springs into being. God’s speech is creative, life-giving. In a fairly obvious reply, I drew his attention to the beginning of St John’s Gospel. John deliberately echoes the opening words of Genesis in the Septuagint, but takes things further – for now we hear what God actually says: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*. And, of course, the breath – in Hebrew *ruach* – the breath without which a word cannot be spoken is the Holy Spirit. God speaks his Word in the breath of the Spirit and all things come to be, all things have life. Words, we agreed – even *our* words – can share in that creative power of God’s Word. Words have power.

I suspect you will all have guessed by now why I have bored you with an account of our dinner conversation. For today’s readings are all – in a sense – about words. In our first reading, the passage from Deuteronomy, God promises through Moses that he will raise up a prophet like himself to ensure that God’s word is never far from Israel his people. At Horeb, the mountain of the Covenant, the people were so terrified by the direct experience of God’s power in voice and fire that they begged never to experience it again. And so God, in his compassion, chooses messengers, angels as it were of the Covenant, to mediate his word to the people: *I will put my words into his mouth, and he shall tell them all that I command him*.

And in the Gospel, we see the fulfilment of that prophecy. Last week, with just two words – Follow me – Jesus totally changed the lives of those four fishermen, Peter and Andrew, James and John, making them his first disciples. Today’s gospel follows immediately after last week’s, and we see the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry in the Synagogue at Capernaum. There are more words than two this time – words of teaching for the people, words of healing for the possessed man, words of command to the demons. And those words of Jesus are powerful – he teaches with authority, unlike the scribes, the demons obey him to the astonishment of the crowd. And those words of the Lord provoke two separate reactions. In the first place, the demons know exactly who Jesus is – the Holy One of God – they know that his words are the words of the Word, and so trembling, they are silenced and obey. The disruptive, destructive words of the unclean spirit are no match for the Word of God. As for the people, they do not yet know *who* Jesus is, they have not yet “put two and two together”, as it were, and recognised in Jesus the one of whom Moses spoke. Yet they too do recognise something new here, something important, something authoritative in Jesus’ words, words backed up by actions and power, and they are captivated, astonished, enthralled. And those words do not stay in the Synagogue – as Mark says, the “word” about Jesus spread everywhere and throughout Galilee.

I wonder where we see ourselves in this? I wonder what our reaction is to this story? Are we perhaps like the demons, recognising Jesus for who he is, but running away in fear of what his word might ask of us? Or are we perhaps like the people, captivated by something in Jesus but not fully aware of who he is, enthralled by the marvels as if he were some magician, going along for the ride to see how things end up? Or are we something different? I wonder at times if we have a different problem. I think we think we know who Jesus is, a little bit like the demons, but I think there can be times when – even knowing that – we are not enthralled by his words, they no longer seem new, and so we barely listen. Our society has a very uneasy relationship with the idea of “authority” – we no longer trust our politicians or our “experts” to lead us well, we no longer trust our police to trust us justly, we no longer trust our media to tell us the truth. Equally, we live in fairly sceptical times – we want evidence for what we hear, we want facts not “spin”, we want proof not stories. And all those things can – little by little – nibble away at our faith, leaving Jesus as just one voice amongst the many voices which surround us, leaving Jesus’ teaching as just one opinion about what living a “good life” might mean. Yet we must never allow ourselves to forget whose words, whose message the gospel is; in Paul’s words: *God’s message, and not some human thinking*.

At least part of the answer, perhaps, lies in the quality of our listening. The RSB opens with that one word: *Listen!* Benedict’s first and greatest command to his monks. And listening is not the same as hearing – it is more focussed, more attentive, listening demands a response. It is perhaps no surprise that our psalm this morning is Ps.94, the same psalm Benedict places on the lips of his monks at the start of everyday’s prayer. In it the psalmist reminds us that true listening is hard – even after seeing the plagues, the Passover and the Crossing of the Red Sea, *still* Israel found it hard to listen and obey – and we can be just the same, surrounded by evidence of God’s love for us in Christ, yet with wayward and straying hearts and closed ears. Yet this obedient listening is the challenge of the Gospel, the challenge of Christian discipleship: *O that today you would listen to his voice, harden not your hearts*.

And if we do even try to start truly listening, truly seeking to hear and follow the will of our loving Father, then we too may start to hear, or hear again the voice of the God whose Word loved us into Creation. We too may hear the voice of the friend and brother who loved us enough to die and rise again for us. We too may hear the voice of the one whose words spoken over bread and wine give us the pledge of eternal salvation. We too may hear the still small voice saying to our hearts: *Fear not, for I have redeemed you: I have called you by name, you are mine... you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you* (Is.43: 1b,4a)

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