

[Readings: Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Ps. 95; 1 Cor 7:32-35; Mark 1:21-28]

How many of you remember the children's game, "Follow the Leader?" A group of children select who will be their leader. The leader determines what path the children will take along the street or sidewalk or driveway. Whatever the leader does, the children have to follow. Raise their arms and shake their hands, march instead of walk, say something silly instead of just being quiet.

Moses is the leader in much of the Old Testament. Only it isn't up to Moses to decide what the people of Israel are to do, or where their journey is to take them: God tells Moses and then Moses tells the people what to do and where to go.

In today's First Reading, Moses is coming to the end of his faith journey. He has successfully and faithfully led them through the desert to the Promised Land. Now, according to God's will, another prophet is to lead them home.

How will that prophet be selected? Unlike the political process, where a potential candidate is trained, appointed or rises up because of a family dynasty, God alone is the One Who selects and creates a prophet. Moses' successor is promised to come from his own kin, his own family, calling his own people to repentance. This prophecy is fulfilled: God provides generations of new prophets to succeed the old, and God provides the holy words that come from their mouths.

In our Second Reading, St. Paul is not denigrating married life but is endorsing stability. Nor is he implying that married people cannot be devoted to the Lord. Last week, I helped a family bury their father of 93 years, who had been married to his wife for over 60 years. Their daughter-in-law and their grandson gave moving testimony to the example of faith and love of their father-in-law and grandfather. Both loved the Lord and gave witness to Him through their vocation of marriage. St. Paul speaks in today's Second Reading of the equality of husband and wife, of a mutuality that remains positive and valid, and of the call for both to make the proper priorities. What are the anxieties of your worldly life that keep you from growing in faith and in your faith practice?

We also have to remember that St. Paul writes this letter to the Corinthians thinking that the return of Jesus Christ in glory is imminent. If YOU were told that the Lord is coming back for us soon, how would YOU react? What would YOU do differently?

“Immediately” is a word which St. Mark uses a lot in his Gospel. The original Greek text in our Gospel for today says that Jesus enters the synagogue on the Sabbath IMMEDIATELY and begins teaching and healing. Note that unclean spirits recognize Jesus before the clean and the righteous people do!

Sometime in the fifth century B.C.E., shortly after Israel returned from exile according to scripture scholars, the prophetic tradition that was to represent God’s will to the people died out. It’s unclear why, although Jeremiah predicted this occurrence with his prophecy of the new covenant written in every heart. The nation would no longer need teachers to mediate the divine. “All, from least to greatest, shall know me, says the Lord.” Jeremiah’s prophecy of the *interior covenant* has been called the most important verse for Christians in Hebrew scripture. The indwelling knowledge of God is essentially what Christians describe as the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost would be a long time coming after the death of prophecy, however. The Bible gives us almost no record of the time from the fifth to second centuries B.C.E. Then came the generations of the Maccabees, the rising of the Roman Empire, and gradual oppression of the Jewish state. Leadership became a pick-up game. And few were listening intently for a word from the Lord.

That’s at least one reason why the people of Capernaum were staggered by the experience they had of Jesus. He commanded unclean spirits successfully. He taught in a way that was not simply scholarly, but rang in their hearts like a tuning fork. The only word they could think of to describe what Jesus did was “authority.” He seemed, frankly, to know God and to speak with divine backing. Israel had not heard a word like that for a long, long time. It was like standing back at the base of Mount Horeb, and this time, not covering their ears.

It may not seem as though the name, “Jesus of Nazareth” is a put-down. When one of the future apostles is told about the arrival of Jesus, he is met with the sarcastic snipe: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” In this case, it is a put-down. Yet the unclean spirit in this man obviously recognizes that this teacher spoke with the authority of God. And he wants to diminish that power by limiting Jesus to His human identity. Rather than calling Him Jesus, Son of God, he wanted Him to be simply Jesus of Nazareth, a regular Joe like anyone else.

He wasn't just Jesus of Nazareth, he was also Jesus, Son of God. His origins were not just a sleepy town in Judea. His origins were in God's own self. And as the Son of God, Jesus came to liberate us from the unclean spirits that plague us all -- even the unclean spirit that wants to put others down.

Jesus teaches and heals “as one having authority.” He calls upon His own power and strength and wisdom, unlike the scribes and the Pharisees, who must rely on the authority of other people, other institutions, and other laws.

The actions of Jesus amaze those around him. Jesus embodies those divine words and deeds in the present and in His person. The Kingdom of God indeed has come. And the demons are running scared. Just as there truly is a God-man named Jesus Christ, there truly are demons and their head, Satan.

What demons are within our hearts, our lives that need to be expelled? Do we believe that Jesus Christ can expel them? Even the best of us harbor within ourselves an unclean spirit or two. “Unclean” simply means not compatible with the holiness of God. This isn't a condition any of us can afford to be in!

Consider the garden variety of dirty spirits that routinely board with us: self-absorption, unforgiveness, envy, judgment, arrogance, hard-heartedness, cynicism, and self-hatred. Identify your familiar demons, practice their counterpoint virtues, and fill your interior house with grace.

Like Jesus Christ, we, His followers, would do well to say what we believe and believe what we say; to do what we believe and believe in what we do. With courage, let us “follow the Leader!” AMEN!