

January 31, 2021 - 4th Sunday after Epiphany - Reflection

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

There are many things about which I give thanks in regard to my connection with God through Jesus Christ and something pretty high on the list is the fact that I have been drawn into a fellowship - a community. As wonderful, at times, as my human family is I am extremely thankful for the larger community of the Church into which I have been welcomed. Even though my personality is one which enjoys private time and which can sometimes make it look like I don't really want people around the fact that I have a community around me is a true joy and this has come about through the work of God.

As I looked at the readings we just heard I recognized that they were all addressed to a community which already existed. The passage from Deuteronomy was directed to the recently rescued nation of Israel as they were about to enter the Promised Land. There were certain things they needed to know to effectively operate as a community of God's people and, in the case of today's passage, the method of testing the qualifications of a prophet of God was the theme. The Psalm was, of course, meant to be declared in the midst of a community but the author makes that even more clear in the first words of the Psalm: "I will extol the Lord with all my heart in the council of the upright and in the assembly. The apostle Paul wrestles with a thorny issue in order to help his readers be a more loving and effective community. And finally, in today's Gospel reading from Mark, Jesus and the disciples go to the synagogue in Capernaum. Along with the wonderful thing that happened in regard to the healing of the demon possessed man I find the context of a believing community quite compelling. This is probably the building in which Simon, Andrew, James and John gathered on the Sabbath as a matter of course. I find it interesting that the word 'synagogue' actually translates as 'gathering place' and as we read through scripture we find that community is at the centre of the work of God.

The community we refer to as the Body of Christ is brought together through 'the fellowship of the Holy Spirit' and so exists even when people can't physically gather so as we meet in our virtual meeting places we can be assured of God's presence. Jesus once said, "where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them". From all these factors it seems very clear to me that community, particularly a community of God's followers, is the venue within which we hear the message of God most clearly. Since we cannot physically gather at this time we are asked to discover other ways of exhibiting the fact that we are part of a community. Whether that means social media, telephones, or mail the connections God has established need to be maintained and strengthened even in the midst of this kind of pandemic. This is important because the work of God mostly takes place from within a community and is always interested in the community being strengthened and enlarged.

We are told by Mark that Jesus went about proclaiming the message that, "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news". From the very beginning of Jesus' ministry among his people he proclaimed that the long awaited time of the Messiah had finally arrived and so the promises of God's kingdom on earth were beginning to come into reality. As he proclaimed this message Jesus knew that people, in general, were looking in the wrong place for

evidence of God's life and so he called for them to "Repent" - to turn around - and believe in this reality even before they saw evidence. This call went out to believers and non-believers but was mostly directed at those who prayed for God's deliverance. As we participate in the story of God we learn that it would be through a renewed version of God's community that the work of God would flow and in that synagogue in Capernaum we see one of the first signs of that kingdom to come.

The synagogue leader had obviously invited Jesus to be the teacher for the service on this occasion. We don't know exactly what Jesus said but we can presume that it was based on the theme of 'the kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe the good news'. We are told that he spoke as one who had the authority to speak and that impressed and astounded his listeners. How much more astounded were they when a man with an unclean spirit attempted to disrupt the meeting. The evidence of the kingdom of God coming near was then displayed as Jesus commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man and it did. Where God is in command nothing unhealthy or unclean can exist and Jesus had come to declare that such a state of affairs was on the horizon. The people in this particular synagogue were indeed amazed and Jesus' fame spread throughout Galilee as the community which had gathered spread the news far and wide. Some of those who were there that day may have taken the other step and turned their lives around and believed the good news but we know that some took offense and did not repent.

The Church communities to which I've belonged over the years have been like that too. They have all been a mixture of those who are totally committed to Jesus and those who are still a bit skeptical. Jesus did not differentiate between those groups of people as he encountered them but instead presented the same message and the same challenge to all. The man with the unclean spirit had probably been attending the same synagogue for years and only the presence of Jesus stirred the unhealthy influence in his life which resulted in his healing. People who had been attending for years were astounded by the fresh approach to the proclamation of God's good news. People who were ready to respond did so and those who were not ready were challenged to take the next steps toward the right direction. That is what happens (or what can happen) each time our community gathers. Jesus does not differentiate between those who seem to have it together and those who do not - he proclaims the same message to us as he did so many years ago. The kingdom of God has come near - repent and believe the good news. We too see the evidence of that nearness from time to time in both simple and profound ways. I recall participating in a service during which the offer of healing prayers was held out and a man, who had never done anything like this before, came forward. After the service was over he told me that as the prayers were offered he had felt bathed in light and held in loving arms while being told that he was loved. For that man the 'unclean spirit' that was in him was the impression he had that he was not worthy of love. On that particular day the kingdom of heaven had come near to him. He repented and believed in the good news and it had a profound effect on his life from that day forward. As I encountered him in future gatherings he often spoke about that life changing moment. Not only the community in which the event took place but the community to which he returned after the healing

rejoiced alongside this man and were amazed at the power of God to heal and restore.

It is very clear to me that community is a very important component and it is also clear to me that community is hard work. God draws people of all sorts into his gathering of believers and they come at all stages in the journey. There are those who are mature and those who are quite innocent. There are prickly ones and helpful ones. There are those who believe they are always right and those who rarely feel they have anything to contribute. All who are gathered are meant to be part of the community and God gifts each one of them with a particular role to play in the ongoing story. (See 1 Corinthians 12) The gathered community is charged with the responsibility of finding ways of governing itself while being governed by the Holy Spirit of God. The passages that we listened to today are a part of the guidance, instruction, and challenge that exists in the task of becoming the best community possible given local circumstances. As Jesus meets with us and through us transformation happens and rough edges are smoothed off while inspiration to become involved in some life changing ministries is given. Jesus walked into a synagogue in Capernaum and proclaimed a message of God's kingdom coming near and at least one man left the gathering with a renewed hope for the future. This is part of the task, and the privilege, of being part of God's community of hope.

There is, of course, much more to be said about the story of that synagogue service and the other readings assigned for today but I invite you to spend some time over the next few days visualizing Church services in which you have participated. Imagine yourself as a watcher and participant listening for the voice of God through the preacher or the readings. Give thanks that you are part of a community which loves God and is seeking to live out the commands to love God and love neighbour. As you meditate ask God to remind you of the times in your life when you have seen the kingdom of heaven coming near bringing restoration or healing into a situation. As we live through this unusual time may God enrich our understanding of the connection we have with each other and the ways in which Jesus continues to work through communities to bring about health and wholeness.

O Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

Attributed to St. Francis of Assisi