

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 4th. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B)
JANUARY 30, 2000

Deuteronomy 18: 15-20 1Corinthians 7: 32-35 Mark 1: 21-28

Dear Preachers:

It is difficult to ignore today's second reading. It begs a preaching. How could we ignore what, on first glance, sounds like an exaltation of the single state of life as a better way to serve the Lord? The married person has, it says, to be “anxious about the things of the world”----pleasing a spouse. It's as if caring for a family and pleasing a spouse take one away from “pleasing the Lord.” Is that what we want people to hear without comment or nuance this Sunday? What about the married, widowed and those who are single now, but hoping to get married? Do we want them to get the impression that their state of life is a second-class form of Christianity? And do we want to canonize this thinking by giving the impression that it is Paul's view on our lives? Don't we need to address this reading in some way?

This is the third week that our second reading has been from I Corinthians. It would be a shame not to preach at least once from this epistle, and what better way than this one when the reading raises such issues? If we decide to preach from it we need to be aware of some background and the context of today's passage. The readings we have heard these past few weeks show that Paul has some difficulties with the Corinthian community. They believed that the freedom we have in Christ gave them permission to live as they pleased, continuing in pagan practices and random sexual acts. Paul addressed some of these issues in the sixth chapter (cf. 2nd. Sunday) when he reminded them of the holiness of the body and presence of God's Spirit within us.

Paul also believed in the imminent return of Christ and so last week (3rd. Sunday), speaking out of that belief, he called the Corinthians to emergency preparations. He told them to forget marriage, mourning, rejoicing and buying for; “the present form of this world is passing away.” Time is running out; there would be no future; planning for a normal life would be the wrong priority. It was out of the conviction that Christ was soon to return, that Paul says what he does in today's passage. Why think of marriage and other concerns, he is suggesting, when all is about to come to an end? It is clear from the concluding statement in the reading that he is not making a sweeping law about not getting married but is trying to be

helpful in the light of the imminent events he is expecting.

First of all, note what is immediately evident in today's text, whether we know the background to the reading or not. He is applying his guidelines to both men and women alike. He has not reserved any preferred or "superior" spiritual teaching to just men, something that would have been customary in his day. Next, consider the suddenness of events in our world and in our personal lives. Paul may have been off about the date of Christ's return, but return Christ does, for each of us. We all face the return of the Lord when we die. We also face crises when something dire happens to us, catching us by surprise. Whether married, single or widowed we each need to tend to the quality of response to Christ in our life. We are involved in a lot of daily activities that require our attention and full-time energies. We either do them without regard to what we believe and what it means to be a Christian, or we do them with consciousness of Christ and the influence he has in our lives. Following Christ is not a part time venture that occupies our attention for an hour or two each week. He has a full-time presence and authority over our lives which require, in Paul's words, "adherence to the Lord without distraction." Which brings us to today's Gospel.

The miracle of the driving out of the unclean spirit is the first miracle in Mark and it sets the stage for the rest of the miracles in this Gospel, for it places questions before those who witness it and before us who hear it this day. Notice that it takes place in the synagogue and follows upon, indeed interrupts, Jesus' teaching. Jesus' cure of the man stirs up questions, not so much about his healing power, but about his authority and thus about his very identity. The miracle and others that will happen in this Gospel, are not a quick fix for faith. They don't automatically make believers from non-believers. If that were so, those present at this one in the synagogue would have immediately fallen on their knees and believed. What these and subsequent miracles in Mark do is raise the kinds of questions the witnesses in today's story have. Who is Jesus and what is the source of his power?

We need to pay attention to how Mark tells this story. There is practically no attention paid to the identity of the man who experiences the cure. Who is he? Where does he come from? Why doesn't he make some kind of faith proclamation, as we are accustomed to hearing in other miracle stories? Mark seems to be emphasizing something else. The exorcism isn't the important focus, for after the cure the man quickly drops out of the picture. What remains is the question about Jesus' authority and beneath that, the very identity of Jesus.

This first miracle in Mark sets a kind of pattern for how to receive subsequent ones when we hear them on the Sundays of this liturgical year. We will be witnesses to Jesus' powerful acts and each time we will need to look beneath them to ask the same question we hear today, "What is this?" There will be still other questions we need to ask ourselves: What does this event in Jesus' life mean for me? What allegiance shall I give him? What changes will I make and how shall I respond to his authority in my life? Isn't it ironic here and elsewhere in Mark that the "unclean spirits" recognize who Jesus is and yet his own people and the religious authorities do not? The unclean spirits know that Jesus is "the Holy One of God", but they do not have faith knowledge of him, so he drives them out. Jesus' teachings may attract us to him, but information about him is just not enough.

More is expected. His fame spreads everywhere, we are told, but fame does not draw the response from people Jesus is expecting. He wants a reordering of priorities, a change of direction in our lives. Maybe that is how Paul and his expectation of Christ's return can still be useful for us. Paul calls each of us, single or married to "adherence to the Lord," without distraction and without anxiety. Even though we may not have the high expectation of Christ's imminent return, we are still called to step out of the routine and patterns of our lives and profess our faith in the One who has authority. Earlier in this first chapter of Mark, John the Baptist promised that one was coming after him who was "more powerful than I" (1:7). The One promised by John has arrived. Faith in Jesus and his teaching calls us to recognize his authority and, through his power, refashion our lives after his.

Today is a chance to make the bystanders' question our own and to examine the kinds of responses we are making to Christ. "What is this?" they ask. We might add, "And what is asked of me in response to the One who teaches with authority and can drive out all the spirits that are distracting me from a fuller response to Christ?"

QUOTABLE:
Watch that Voice

What do schoolteachers, cheerleaders and sports enthusiasts [preachers too!] have in common? They are all prone to voice strain. In fact, anyone who speaks or sings loudly and/or frequently can develop voice strain. Ellen Markus, a speech pathologist and coordinator of the Voice Wellness

Clinic at UNC Hospitals, offers these general tips for treating voice strain:

- ▶ Stop smoking
- ▶ Drink eight 8-ounce glasses of water each day. (Don't count caffeinated drinks or alcohol because they dehydrate the vocal folds.)
- ▶ Be aware that many medications, especially antihistamines, also cause dehydration. If you must use these medications, drink extra fluids and use a humidifier at home.
- ▶ Get plenty of rest. When the body is fatigued, all its muscles are fatigued.

Sometimes a sudden change in a person's voice--such as hoarseness, breathiness, chronic throat-clearing or coughing--may be an indication of something else. If the problem lasts more than two weeks, Markus recommends that you see a physician.

-----from **The News and Observer**, (Raleigh, N.C.) August 29, 1996

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“Blessings on your preaching”,

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