

Epiphany IV

February 1, 2009

The lessons this morning go together in a subtle but important and troubling way. Let's look at them for a minute. From Deuteronomy, we hear God promise the people of Israel—who have been whining about how uncomfortable it is to be around the actual presence of God—that God will send them a prophet, like Moses, who will speak God's word. And the people had better listen; and the prophets had better get it right. So there.

Then there is that fascinating bit from Paul about eating idol meat. This was a big deal back then because many of the animals used for food were slaughtered as part of a religious ceremony—usually at a temple or holy place; and the meat was then distributed, used at a party or festival, or sold. So, some Christians from Corinth asked Paul, were you getting your religion wrong and worshiping idols if you ate this meat; or did knowing better make it O.K.?

After all, didn't the folks who had knowledge, who had the truth (and Paul agrees they have the truth—the gods of the idols don't really exist) didn't they have all they needed? Having knowledge, why should they worry about anything else? To that, Paul answers “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up”. Somehow, Paul argues a bit awkwardly, just getting it right is not enough. Knowledge, even knowledge of the truth, does not exist in splendid isolation, apart from others, or apart from the nature of God. More is needed.

Finally, the Gospel of Mark begins the account of a busy day for Jesus. (We get the rest of that day next Sunday.) Jesus goes to Capernaum, which is in the North, on the Sea of Galilee, and teaches in the synagogue there. He hits a home run with his sermon, and people are marveling not just at what he says, but at how he teaches—directly, with authority.

(Remember, the rabbis back then taught from the tradition: What about that? Well, Rabbi so-and-so says this, and Rabbi such-and-such says that—and so on—sometimes giving their own opinion at the end, sometimes not. Jesus was different.)

So all three lessons talk about authority and about truth. They are all about how God makes himself known to us, and what it's like to encounter God doing that. And what I think these readings are pointing to is a very Jewish take on a very Greek notion. It's this: the truth, the whole truth is personal, the whole truth is communal. The whole truth is not something that stands all alone, all by itself, up there on a pedestal somewhere, independent and immaculate. Instead, truth is bound up in persons, in individual people, and in human communities and relationships; and to take the truth out of that context is to distort it. That's the point. Now, I have some real problems with this, and I'm not sure I like it very much; but the Bible seems to be pushing the point, so, I'm willing to listen.

First of all, notice again what God said he would do for Israel in order to remain present with them. God did not say he would send a program, or a book, or a set of rules, or even a guarantee. Instead, God said he would send a person, really a bunch of persons, the prophets, to speak for him. God's word would always, even from the beginning, always *be made flesh*; it would come in fleshly form—and the people are left with the problems both of understanding it and of figuring out which of the various competing words they hear are in fact from words God. But it was to be a person, and not a thing, that was to contain, and to convey, the truth of God's will for his people. So truth is always part of a relationship—a relationship of speaking and listening, most often with someone you knew, someone who made surprising claims to authority, someone who spoke words you would have to think about—someone who stares back at you.

This is what's behind Paul's labored attempt to tell the people in Corinth who knew the truth, abstractly, that they were still far short of the mark. To know the truth without love is not fully to know the truth. To know the truth without love is worse than being ignorant. You see, to know the truth without love is to take truth out of the context of the nature and character of God, (who is the source and foundation of all truth) and so to have an almost demonic mutation of the truth, a mutation that can easily become malignant.

To claim the truth as an excuse to endanger or to harm your brothers and sisters is to use an ointment as a sword, a gift as a weapon; and it will damage everyone involved. Something more is going on here than just getting the right answers on a true/false test. Something more is at stake than just a good grade in theology.

Like I said, this is troubling—not the least because Paul and other New Testament writers seem from time to time to say just the opposite. They sometimes insist that the truth must be maintained regardless of the costs or the consequences. Then, what's worse, they don't give any clear reasons for when to go one way or the other. We have to figure that out. Darn. Finally, I have a bit of a penchant for philosophy, and I don't like fuzzy thinking, vague conclusions, or slippery arguments. They offend me. But I think we're stuck with all of this if we're going to take the Bible, and especially Jesus, seriously.

So, let's look again at the story from Mark. Jesus is in the synagogue—a public place where people know each other—a place of study, argument and worship. It's within this network of relationships that they meet the truth in Jesus. And once they've been shaken up and challenged, they turn to each other to make sense of what has happened. They start to talk among themselves. They wonder about it together.

On the day that Jesus showed up in their synagogue, they discovered that the truth is not a “what,” a thing, an inheritance left over from the past, something they should keep stored away, wrapped in tissue paper. Instead, they experience the truth as a “who,” a living, breathing man whose face they can recognize and whose actions they cannot control—as someone who stares back at them.

Also, did you notice that Mark doesn’t tell us what Jesus said? Instead, Mark talks about who Jesus is—about what it is like to come face to face with the one who says of himself, “I am...the truth.” Jesus’ authority goes far beyond the words he says; it resides finally in his person; and in our relationship with that person. Like it or not, the fullness of truth is personal, it’s communal. It stares back at us.

Now, this isn’t some glib post-modern slogan to justify believing anything or nothing at all (and do not misunderstand me here, there is plenty to believe, and much that isn’t up for grabs)—instead, the notion that the whole truth is personal is an insight fundamental to an incarnational faith. God comes to us as a person. The Word is made flesh. Always.

And this means several things. First, it means that something in us has to die. That something is our belief that we can somehow tame, or nail down, or control the truth—that we can make it exclusively ours. As reassuring and as comfortable as this notion is—it has to die. For, if truth is alive, if truth, real truth, the whole truth, is personal, if truth always stares back at us, then our hope for a static, impersonal and abstract truth is groundless—and then at least two more things happen.

First, my good philosopher’s questions are left hanging, and that’s the way it is. It’s messy; we have to work at it together. Second, everyone and anyone we encounter becomes precious—for they are persons, and this is the way God brings his truth to us. Personally.