

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, YEAR B

First Reading Deuteronomy 18: 15–20

The book of Deuteronomy is the fifth and last book of the Torah, also called the Pentateuch. It is a book of instruction. Moses speaks on God's behalf to the people of Israel as they are about to enter the Promised Land. It was written down centuries after the events it relates.

Today's text reflects on who a prophet is, and how we might distinguish a false prophet from a true one. The true prophet is a channel of communication between God and his people: he is a mouthpiece for God. The people needed a buffer between themselves and God. They asked for this at Horeb, since they thought they would die if they saw God directly.

The prototype of the true prophet then is Moses. He has the authority given to him when he brings down the Law from Mount Sinai. Moses comes from the people, is selected by God, speaks to him and conveys his message to the people.

The difficulty is not in finding a prophet – according to the first book of Kings, about 400 of them could be called upon (1Kings 22:6) – but in deciding which ones are speaking from God.

Much of the Old Testament deals with this problem. One way the authors seek to ensure authenticity is by describing the Prophet's call, thus underpinning their authority (as in Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel). In this text, the prophet is deemed genuine because he is following in the Mosaic tradition ('a prophet like me'). It gives him prestige and authority.

Christians would later see Jesus as the ultimate true prophet, the 'New Moses', emphasising, as in today's Gospel, that he speaks 'with authority'.

Gospel Mark 1: 21–28

Here Jesus and his new disciples now go back to Capernaum and begin their ministry. The structure of the account is typical of Mark's Gospel, starting and ending with two general comments about Jesus's authority (vv. 21–22 and 27–28) and telling of an exorcism Jesus performed. This technique, known as 'intercalation', is more commonly referred to as the 'sandwich structure'. It underlines the true focus of the story.



Capernaum

This prosperous town on the Sea of Galilee, then numbering c. 1000 inhabitants, can be considered as the home town of the adult Jesus. Situated on the main trade route from Eastern Syria to Palestine, its ports would have suited Jesus's ministry much better than Nazareth, a mountainous and isolated hamlet. Capernaum was also sufficiently apart from the big centres (especially Tiberias, where Herod Antipas had set his capital), so there was less danger of Jesus getting into too much trouble with political and religious leaders.

Unlike the scribes, he taught them with authority

Jesus is not bound by traditional interpretation of texts and laws as are the rabbis and scribes. Whereas scribes would only repeat accepted interpretation, Jesus joins action to his words: what he says comes to pass. Teaching with authority on the part of a carpenter's son from Nazareth would indeed have been astonishing. Society was both structured and static, with social status depending on where you came from and what your father did.

A man possessed by an unclean spirit

At that time it was believed that sickness was caused by evil spirits. In a synagogue where ritual purity was all-important, this man was 'unclean'. Jesus challenges social conventions by dealing with him.

'I know who you are'

The possessed man acknowledges Jesus's true identity, but as happens several times in Mark's Gospel (e.g. 1: 43–45, 3: 11–12, 7: 36, 8: 30), Jesus does not wish to reveal who he truly is at this stage. Scholars call this the 'Messianic secret'. Naming an adversary was supposed to give power over him.

'Come out of him!'

Exorcism can be seen as a way of setting people free, of bringing a deliverance beyond what that person can request. These days, medicine speaks in terms of mental illness; at that time, of unclean spirits.