

**Epiphany 4B (2/1/09 – Jesus – Epiphanied as Prophet ... Teacher with Authority)**

In the Name JESUS. [Amen]

*And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, “What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him!”* [MK 1.27]

When we think about the teaching of Jesus, we naturally think about His work and promise of salvation. And that is good ... since that is, in fact, the Lord’s most important teaching – that He came into this world to live and to die for us and, in this way only, to grant us salvation. Everything that the Lord did and taught had as its focal point the message of salvation.

So it might seem strange to us when we hear that the people of Capernaum in today’s *Gospel Lesson* were amazed by Jesus’ teaching and that **to them** His was a **new** teaching. That would seem to say that the things they heard coming from Jesus’ mouth were not in line with the teachings they were accustomed to hearing.

And this was, unfortunately, the case. For the message that the religious teachers of their day were advocating was all about the people’s actions, not about God’s actions. It centered around the things that **you** were supposed to be doing **for** God – not about the things that **God** had done (and was still doing) **for them** ... out of and because of and by His grace. The religious leaders taught that if you wanted God to be pleased with you, then you had better behave yourself and try to do those things that make God happy.

Needless to say, that kind of approach can only leave people in a constant state of uncertainty. How will you ever know if you have done enough to please God? And, even if you are so bold as to assume that you **have** done enough – in your **own** estimation – how can you be sure that **God** is just as satisfied with you as **you** are with yourself?

Well, this was the kind of unrelenting doubt that hung over the heads of these people. It turned them into paranoid people ... cowardly people ... people who were always looking over their shoulders wondering if God was going to get them for what they did wrong. You know people like that today – and maybe sometimes **you’re** one of them. On the other hand, in some cases this teaching produced some very self-righteous people; those who believed that God was pleased with their upstanding behavior – and again, you know people like that today ... and no doubt sometimes **you’re** one of them. In either case, such a teaching produces an insufferable existence.

Now when these Capernaimites heard what Jesus had to say, they were amazed, for He taught them as One Who had authority – indeed, powerful authority! For

when Jesus taught in the synagogue that Sabbath Day, a demon-possessed man present there suddenly was freed from that oppression. The demon departed from him screaming: *What have You to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know Who You are – the Holy One of God!* [MK 1.24] For those gathered there, this was no doubt quite a dramatic scene. But, again, our text today makes it quite clear that it was the **source** of that exorcism – the authoritative **teaching** of Jesus – that left the greatest impact on the crowd ... not the exorcism itself!

And so it is with us ... in our day. We are subjected to a great many, so-called Christian teachers in our world. You can hardly turn on the TV, switch on the radio, or browse through a publication ... or the internet ... without being confronted with someone advocating his own particular brand of Christian ministry and teaching – even at a Presidential Inauguration. And most of these teachers lure people in with the promise of success and power in their lives: If you will only follow a few spiritual steps. And if you do these things, then you will be blessed by God. But in truth, that kind of teaching is no less damaging than what the people in our *Gospel* were subject to by their religious leaders.

Sure, many of the teachers and preachers in today's world **mention** the person of Jesus Christ in the midst of their message – but what are they saying about Him? How do they define Christ's role or purpose in your life? Do they picture Jesus in terms of being a positive thinker from whom we can glean similar self-confident characteristics? If so, then theirs is not a genuine Christian teaching. Do they expound the belief that God's blessings are contingent upon the way in which you conduct yourself, in a holy and righteous manner? Then – again – theirs it is not a true Christian teaching. To put it in the terms of our *Old Testament Lesson*, they are prophets who presume to speak a word in the Name of God that God has not commanded them to speak [DEU 15.20] ... and their end shall be death.

For the **true** Christian message is not about **our** lifestyle ... though our lifestyle will reflect it; nor about our positive thinking ... though our thinking will be positively influenced; nor about what **we** do for God or **for** one another ... though we **will** act, doing what is pleasing to God and beneficial to our neighbor. Rather, the true Gospel message is all about what **God** has done **for you** through His Son, Jesus of Nazareth, the Holy One!

You know the essence of the Gospel message ... and you will no doubt see a sign referring to it sometime this afternoon (if you watch “the big game”) – *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him, shall not perish, but have everlasting life.* That is the essence of the Gospel. Do you hear anything in that teaching about a conditional love on

God's part? Absolutely not! God showed His love for the world when this world was in total rebellion against Him; but God decided to love us anyway! When God gave the gift of His Son to us, it wasn't dependent on anything **we** had done to deserve it ... nor does God continue to bestow His love upon us because of **our** attempts to live a holy and righteous life – though such Godly living and good works **will** follow on our faith ... as the Holy Spirit continually works in our lives and through us for the blessing of our neighbor. But if we should ever start relying upon the good things that we do or the changed life that we live as the assurance that we are Christians – as the proof that we're going to heaven – then ours will be a faith based **not** upon the life of Jesus Christ, but upon **our own** lives; lives which, in no way, are able to earn an approval rating from God.

But in the faithful, God-given Word of the Old Testament prophets, the New Testament apostles – and especially in the Prophet-greater-than-Moses Word made Flesh Who has spoken to us in these Last Days – we find spelled out so clearly for us that forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given to us **freely** for **Jesus'** sake. In speaking of His purpose for coming into this world, Jesus says: ***The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many*** [MK 10.45]. In other words, Jesus didn't come to demand obedience **from** us, but to offer His own obedience **for us**. So, if you wish to speak a word in the Name of Jesus ... talk about the true teaching of Jesus, you must always speak in terms of **His** substitutionary life and death on your behalf. You have to talk about the holy life that **He** lived in our place. You have to focus in on the sacrificial death that **He** suffered in your stead. St. Paul puts it this way: ***I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified*** [1COR 2.2]. And that is the only Gospel teaching that carries authority – for **that** is the teaching ... the Word ... that proceeds from the mouth of God Himself.

And it is, therefore, an authoritative teaching! In the synagogue that teaching displayed its power and authority by delivering a man from demon possession. Dear saints, God's Word is no less powerful today! When sinners undergo Holy Baptism by water and the Word, unclean spirits are once again driven out ... to make way for the Holy Spirit. When we receive the Lord's Supper, the living Flesh and Blood of Jesus Christ enters into our mortal bodies ... and grants us eternal life. If only we could realize – fully – that when the Word of Holy Scripture is read in our midst today, we are hearing the living voice of God's Son speaking those Words to us right now ... for He has promised to be with His Church till the end of the world!

This is the Word that brings us salvation; this is the only type of teaching that holds any kind of assurance for us. You can talk all you want about the evidence of the Spirit's work in your own life – how your life is different ... how you

behave differently when confronted with trials and temptations. But then, if you're going to be completely honest, you'll have to talk about the other things in your life as well – your continued weaknesses ... your impure thoughts ... your failures to demonstrate the kind of love and forgiveness that you should. And you will quickly discover that if you look at yourself for the proof that you are a Christian and that you're going to heaven, you will never have the certainty that you need.

The true, prophetic teaching never starts with the Christian – with **us** – it **always** begins and ends with **Christ!** Are your sins forgiven? Look at the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the answer – and the answer is **yes!** Are you going to heaven? Look to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ – and the answer is **yes!** Are you really a Christian? Don't look inside yourself for the assurance – rather look to Jesus Who today is *Epiphanied as Prophet ... Teacher with Authority*. Listen to His Word that says: *You did not choose me, but I chose you.* [JN 15.16] There is the proof! There's all the assurance you need. And you can take that promise with you all the way to heaven – for that teaching carries the authority of God Himself!

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. [Amen]