

**Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany**  
**January 31, 2021**

I ask your prayers this week for those working to distribute and administer the vaccine. A daunting task, filled with chaos, confusion and uncertainty. Pray for those working on this important step forward. And when you have the opportunity to receive the vaccine, please do it, and get the shots – this will help us all through this.

Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.  
*And blessed be God's kingdom, now and forever. Amen.*

Let's pray this together.

*Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

The Lord be with you.  
*And also with you.*

Let us now pray together the collect of the day.

*Almighty and everlasting God, you govern all things both in heaven and on earth: Mercifully hear the supplications of your people, and in our time grant us your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

**First Lesson**

**Deuteronomy 18:15-20**

Moses said: The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: "If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die." Then the Lord replied to me: "They are right in what they have said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die."

**The Response**

**Psalm 111**

*Confitebor tibi*

1 Hallelujah!

I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart,  
in the assembly of the upright, in the congregation.

2 Great are the deeds of the Lord!

they are studied by all who delight in them.

3 His work is full of majesty and splendor,  
and his righteousness endures for ever.

4 He makes his marvelous works to be remembered;  
the Lord is gracious and full of compassion.

5 He gives food to those who fear him;  
he is ever mindful of his covenant.

6 He has shown his people the power of his works  
in giving them the lands of the nations.

7 The works of his hands are faithfulness and justice;  
all his commandments are sure.

8 They stand fast for ever and ever,  
because they are done in truth and equity.

9 He sent redemption to his people;  
he commanded his covenant for ever;  
holy and awesome is his Name.

10 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;  
those who act accordingly have a good understanding;  
his praise endures for ever.

## **The Epistle**

### **1 Corinthians 8:1-13**

Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him.

Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.” Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. “Food will not bring us close to God.” We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your family, and

wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

## **The Gospel**

The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, according to Mark.  
*Glory to you Lord Christ.*

### **Mark 1:21-28**

Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, “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.” But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

*Praise to you, Lord Christ.*

## **A Reflection**

May the words written and the prayer of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

For some reason, the word that seems to leap off the page when reading this passage from Mark is *authority*. Authority is a rather loaded word that seems to bring to mind almost a military type of discipline – no question – no back talk – just do what you are told.

Scripture offers much authority – and that authority has also been misused and misdirected more times than I can count. Today’s reading from Deuteronomy begins to touch on the issue and goes on to offer much in the way of the law. I would stress here that the law offered in Deuteronomy needs to be read with great discernment and much consideration for the context of the time in which it was written. The law in Deuteronomy and Leviticus has been used to justify some deeply misguided things in the name of God.

Even today’s reading from Corinthians touches on law and the authority of Scripture when it offers, “Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” The authority is there, but it is acknowledged that knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” One begins to wonder where the authority actually comes from.

I feel it fair to say that as a culture, we do not have the best of relationship with authority for many of the same reasons I have listed. We are strong independent people – no one can tell us what to do! Authority seems to suggest that sort of blind obedience that no one is fond of.

Perhaps military, perhaps a teacher, perhaps even a parent. You did what you were told, or there were consequences.

In our culture, we seem to not respond well to authority, as responding to authority means something is bigger than we are. Not necessarily better, not specifically stronger, just bigger, and no one seems to like that idea.

Who are the authorities in your life? Are you expected to follow them blindly, without question, or is there room for discernment? Is the authority based on love?

In today's Gospel, Jesus is credited with having "A new teaching—with authority!" He commands unclean spirits, and they obey him. But before this happens, there is something else to take note of here. The unclean spirits also recognize Jesus for who and what he is. We hear, "Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." The spirits recognize him, and when confronted with his command of "Be silent, and come out of him!" The spirit does as it has been commanded. By this, people respond to this act of authority but seem to not heed how the spirit has identified the source of authority.

I need to be honest with you about authority – my own relationship with authority has not always been comfortable. This led to a number of surprised reactions from people who had known me for a number of years when they heard part of my ordination vow as a priest was to follow the authority of the Bishop. When I was asked how I might respond to that vow, my first response was saying that I can't accept the expectation of blind obedience to authority and asked if I would be able to ask questions if I didn't understand what was being asked of me.

That ability to ask questions creates, for me, a vision of authority I can work with. No assumption of it being absolute and blind and with enough care to allow room for discussion. (Rest assured, I also say this knowing there are times the authority gets the final word!) But this kind of authority comes more from the heart than the mind – more from the heart than any title or rank. So when Jesus taught with authority, he taught in a way that resonated in the hearts of those who heard him. And he was also heard by the unclean Spirits.

Kim described it as the authority of a coach, not a drill sergeant. A good coach works with the players on the field, to lead them into a perhaps better way to play together. Yes, sometimes a coach yells like a drill sergeant, but they need to in order to be heard on the field. With apologies for the sports metaphor, maybe this is what Jesus offers – guidance and authority on ways we can better play together and offer a better game. We, unfortunately, seem to be more interested in the stories of his dramatic plays on the field than in learning from him as a coach with authority.

I ask again, who are the authorities in your life? Are you expected to follow them blindly, without question, or is there room for discussion and learning from their authority? Does their authority resonate in your heart, or are you more concerned with doing everything the authority asked?

For myself – I still have a problem getting comfortable with authority. I accept God's authority, knowing that God is bigger than I am, and can see more of the field than I can, but I still ask questions. Quite often in the last few years, those questions are about my own authority –

questioning my authority as a parent and of my authority as a priest. God, however, like a good coach keeps me in play – I often think just to see if I can figure it out!

I ask again – who or what has authority over you?

*Amen.*

Let us now confess our sins against God and our neighbor. Praying together:

*Most merciful God,  
we confess that we have sinned against you  
in thought, word, and deed,  
by what we have done,  
and by what we have left undone.  
We have not loved you with our whole heart;  
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.  
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.  
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,  
have mercy on us and forgive us;  
that we may delight in your will,  
and walk in your ways,  
to the glory of your Name. Amen.*

Let us end by praying as our Lord Jesus Christ taught us. Pray this as you will, out loud or to yourself – just know that God hears you.

*Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy Name,  
thy kingdom come,  
thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those  
who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom,  
and the power, and the glory,  
for ever and ever. Amen.*

We will continue with the prayer of Spiritual Communion. This prayer was written by St. Alphonsus de Liguori. This prayer is now often used when the church is in a place of fasting from Communion, and I have heard this used in many of the on-line services being offered. We will be using this prayer in place of Communion as we work on regathering, too.

*Jesus, I believe that you are truly present in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. I love you above all things, and long for you in my soul. Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally, come at*

*least spiritually into my heart. As though you have already come, I embrace you and unite myself entirely to you; never permit me to be separated from you. Amen.*

A quick announcement – plans are being made to have our Annual Parish Meeting online (as a Zoom meeting) on Sunday, February 7 at noon. (More details to follow soon!)

I'm still giving some thought to making "office hours" available again. Once a week, for limited times – a chance to share a cup of tea and some stories of our current adventures and pray together. Let me know if there is any interest in this idea. I can always be reached at **DPrentice@TrinityofWoburn.com.**

And remember, life is short, and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those we travel with. So be swift to love – make haste to be kind – and now go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

Yours in Christ,  
Dave+