

Readings and Sermon for Epiphany 4

29th January 2012

Readings

Deut 18:15-20 *A New Prophet Like Moses*

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.’

Rev 12:1-5a *The Woman and the Dragon*

A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth. Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne;

Mark 1:21-28 *The Man with an Unclean Spirit*

They 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, throwing him into convulsions 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.

How have you encountered God?

How did you respond or react?

Was it an encounter that drew you up short, an encounter that comforted you?

Or is this a type of experience you're not yet sure if you've had or recognised?

Encounters with God mark us, change us, whether we recognise them or not. One type of encounter is that shown in these three readings – our God is an awesome God. Encounters like these are the ones we can't pass by or ignore, the ones that are so powerful and awesome that we're afraid of the things they show up within us.

Yet for our faith and fellowship with God to grow, each of us must, at some time, have an encounter with God that makes us aware of the things He shows up. Because if we don't, we easily sideline God, and sidestep him, bringing him out when we want or need something, but never seeing the power and glory of who He is. If we have no understanding of His power and glory then we will also have a shallow understanding of His love for us.

For each of us, He will craft in love our encounters with Him, for each according to our personalities, our life experiences, our needs and circumstances and our journey of faith at that point.

Our God is an awesome God, and encounters with Him are awesome!

This week may be a time to reflect on what encounters you have had.

Our 3 readings today have 3 different types of encounter.

In Deuteronomy is the personal encounter with the God who speaks to us, Yet we can't cope with seeing him and hearing Him face to face – hence His promise of a prophet, one of us, who will speak His words.

Remember, this is said to a people who knew the God of fiery presence: the mountain of Horeb (Sinai) where they couldn't come near to touch on pain of death; the awe and fear of God descending in a fiery thundering cloud as Moses went up the mountain to receive the 10 Commandments – and that after they'd all purified themselves for 3 days! They also knew the Pillar of Cloud by day becoming the Pillar of Fire by night to guide them through the wilderness.

They knew about the fearful presence of God!

In Revelation we see the Lord's power in protecting those who are His against those who are out to destroy. There are personal situations, practical situations and spiritual situations where God's protecting action is there for His people. Sometimes these are frightening events, leaving us very shaky, yet afterwards aware of the Lord's protection keeping us through it.

In Mark we encounter Jesus, the prophet promised in Deuteronomy to speak God's commands. The first part of the encounter is with Jesus the prophet, teaching and speaking with authority. The people were surprised at his teaching – so confident, so forthright, not the “quibbling and quoting” of the religious scholars. There was something about Jesus that hit the mark of their daily lives.

Then suddenly – it went to a different dimension!

They were interrupted out the blue by the arrival of a deeply disturbed man, a man with an unclean spirit, a man not able to be at ease with himself or others or God. Yet there was something about this afflicting evil that could see the purity of Jesus, could see Jesus as more than an ordinary human being. That insight disturbed the man so greatly that he couldn't hold back his shouts of fear – This man Jesus was the Holy One of God! He could see beyond Jesus-the-human-being to the glory of God, and so gave Jesus that post-resurrection title, Holy One.

And in a dramatic move, Jesus used the authority with which He was teaching, to set the man free from the unholiness that gripped him.

What a wake up call to those witnesses in the synagogue! This is their encounter with the Living God, who shows Himself to be dwelling in His chosen prophet, the one who is like them and yet speaks God's word – and gives a new teaching that “does what it says.”

How were they to respond to the Holy One whose indisputable action brought healing to one of their community? And how then were they to respond to the authority of Jesus' teaching?

These people had to respond to their encounter with the Living God.

And so do we.

As we go through this week, let us be alive to these encounters with God.

Let us also consider how we can share some aspects to these encounters with each other, to be part of the body of Christ nourishing each other.

Pause

And now as we prepare for Communion, we have here an encounter with God's love poured out in sacrifice – for us.