Epiphany 4B 2021 Surprises when the Final Word is Spoken

Deuteronomy 18: 15 – 20

Mark 1: 21 – 28

When important people speak everyone listens. Out of respect for the person and the office, no one dares to speak against. There is another reason why everyone listens to certain speakers, and that is, the awesome nature of what is being spoken. When the content is captivating, it always demands an audience.

An Australian man lost his father when he was a boy and became so angry with God, he lashed out at the world with uncontrolled bitterness. After falling into organized crime, he led a gang of mobsters into a packed stadium who came for a Billy Graham crusade. Their mission was to assassinate God’s messenger and silence him forever. The man told his wicked mates to wait until the appeal after the message had ended. Then with concealed guns, they would rush the stage and pull the trigger. By the end of the sermon, all but one were drenched with repentant tears and instead of rushing the stage, they came forward and God changed their lives forever.

The point of this true story is not to advocate altar calls, but to illustrate how even mobsters respected the preacher by not interrupting him and that God’s word changes lives by giving eternal life in Christ Jesus.

When Jesus spoke in the synagogue in Capernaum, his hearers were knocked out of their senses with uncontrollable amazement. Why? They never heard preaching like that before. It carried more weight than they thought was possible. It exceeded anything human. It was wisdom from on high.

Who would dare interrupt him? The silence was out of respect for what was spoken and the great office from which it came. Moses promised a prophet would arise from among the brethren of Israel. “*It is to him you shall listen*.” The people of Israel did not have a prophet for four hundred years, which is roughly as long as they were enslaved in Egypt.

After hearing Jesus preach, they were surprised to hear what a man of God sounds like and were filled with wonder at what their future might hold. Could it be that God had not forsaken them after all? This was no longer a man speaking but they were convinced that the words of Jesus, was the word of God.

This is the first surprise: **The man Jesus speaks like God because He is God.**

Jesus came from Nazareth, preached in the Capernaum synagogue, looked like any ordinary scribe and teacher of the law, but when he opened his mouth, the words came straight from God for He is God.

To be sure, the congregation of Capernaum did not immediately begin to dwell on the divine nature of Jesus, nor draw the conclusions of the council of Chalcedon (451AD) whereby the two natures of Christ, his complete manhood and Godhead, were confessed in one person. (against the Monophysite and Eutychian heresies)

But the way the evangelist St. Mark writes about Jesus, he invites his hearers to ponder the question: what do you think about Him. The Old Testament clearly pointed to his birth from a virgin, in Bethlehem, from the brothers in Israel, who would bring salvation to all nations, and rule from sea to sea on the throne of his father David, forever.

Yes, we too stand in awe of the words of Jesus and give thanks to God for sending us the final prophet in his Son, however this doesn’t deliver the goods of salvation.

This leads to the second surprise. It comes from the mouth of a demon who rushed into the synagogue to confront Jesus. The demon took total control of the poor man. It had no problem interrupting Jesus despite knowing exactly who Jesus is. He said so. “*I know who you are – the Holy One of God.”* This could mean only one thing: **Jesus is the eternal Son of the Father.**

All the devils heard what the Father said to Jesus at His baptism: You are my beloved Son. While people may ignore or reject what the Father says at the waters of baptism, the demons can not! They must of necessity acknowledge the Father’s word. How much more should we treasure God’s baptismal promises to us?

But what surprises them is how the glory and power of God could be found in the weakness of a flesh and blood man from Nazareth! It is the opposite of what the Capernaum synagogue thought. They were amazed at the divine words from the human mouth of Jesus. The demons in meeting Jesus, were surprised that God would lower Himself to become a man.

Not only were they surprised but they were offended that God would lower himself to such a place in the cosmos. Demonic pride thinks itself higher than mankind. Angels have super human strength and ability. They have no material bodies that wear out. Shouldn’t God become one of them at least, instead of a mortal man?

The demons expected Jesus to do to them, what they do to helpless mortals. They destroy lives by taking control of helpless victims. Don’t be fooled and think this was a case of epilepsy, or schizophrenia or any disorder of multiple personalities. This was something akin to the Exorcist, the exorcism of Emily Rose or the Amityville Horror. Brutal and merciless domination and destruction!

But Jesus does not destroy them. That’s not why God became man. It was to cleanse, to heal and to save humanity. In the same way Jesus did not destroy the legion of demons which possessed a man from the hill country of the Gerasenes, but sent them into a herd of swine. The demons destroyed the entire herd by plunging them from a cliff into the sea of Galilee.

To demons, people are a play toy, helpless things to be possessed and controlled. On the other hand, the Son of God born of Mary, came not to possess us but set us free; not to control but to love; not to dominate but to serve.

Jesus does it all by just one word. It is the word of forgiveness. God’s word absolves us from all vile and evil thoughts and lifts the heaviest most oppressive burdens. When the devil tries to dredge up your past sins to God, he must hear Jesus say again to him: Be silent. This child of God is washed in holy baptism and covered by my grace and mercy. You can no longer accuse here Satan.

In the same way when Christ gives the absolution to the penitent, he grants great power and authority to the pastor to overturn the rightful condemnation of the law. For the law rightly condemns us and when we are finally honest before God, confess that by our sins, we have earned the wages of our destruction which is temporal and eternal punishment. Yet by one word of the living God, the law is overturned and Christ gives the power to heal, cleanse and to forgive.

When Jesus speaks the final word there are always many surprises. For those in Capernaum that did not think of him beyond a fantastic preacher, their sins before God keep heaven closed. For demons, the word of Jesus is maddening because they must obey and they are confounded why Christ would become man to save mankind.

On the Final Day, Jesus will have the Final Word, and there will be many surprises again. There will be many moral, upstanding, and kind people who have not repented nor believed the gospel, who you thought for sure should be in heaven but won’t be there. They had no time or need to hear Jesus speak one word of forgiveness. And then there will be others there who lived as enemies of God, like the Australian mobster in the opening, who will be overcome at the Lord’s mercy and rejoice at the Saviour’s invitation to come and feast with Him forever.

O Lord, heal our wrongs and help us who are in great need with one word of forgiveness. Thank you for ending sin’s reign over us and bid our anxious hearts to be silent so that we might rest in you forever. Amen