

The Necessary Knowledge

One of the wonderful things about worshiping in a tradition that uses the common lectionary is the way in which it invites us to read intertextually, to allow how we hear the readings from the Hebrew Bible to inform how we hear the Epistles, and how we hear both of these to inform how we hear the Gospels. I want to draw this morning on all three of today's lectionary readings: Deuteronomy on the raising up of a prophet, 1 Corinthians on the eating of food sacrificed to idols, and the Gospel of Mark on Jesus rebuking the unclean spirit. The connecting theme here is that of knowledge—prophetic knowledge, the knowledge that unclean spirits claim to have of Jesus as the Holy One of God, and something that Paul calls the “necessary knowledge.” This necessary knowledge is a bit mysterious, but if we pay close attention, we can figure out what it is. Paul gives us the big clue and today's big takeaway: “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” So, hold on tight—off we go!

In Deuteronomy, Moses proclaims that “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people.” Moses is a towering prophet, but he is not the only prophet. Christians reading this passage look ahead to Jesus's prophetic proclamation of the kingdom of God. I'll have more to say about Jesus as prophet in a moment. First, though, let's stay for a moment with the people of Israel. We sense here a deep longing to know God and God's will, together with awe and terror that is bound up with encountering the holy. This awe and terror are so powerfully conveyed by Isaiah's account of his calling as a prophet, which we echo in each and every Eucharistic liturgy:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
The whole earth is full of his glory'.

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!' (Isaiah 6: 1-5).

The awe and terror of encountering God is not the terror of encountering overwhelming power and might, looking up at Niagara Falls, or an avalanche hurtling down upon one, or an advancing army that utterly overwhelms one's own forces. It is the awe and terror of recognizing one's own unworthiness, one's unclean lips. It is this that leads the people of Israel to say on Mount Horeb on the day of the assembly, "If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die." It is this that leads them to ask God to send prophets. Prophets who will speak in the name of the LORD, mediating between God and the people. And God grants their request.

But note an issue lurking here. As we saw with Jonah last week, it is an open question whether the prophet will actually speak the words of the LORD, or whether the prophet will instead presume to speak in the name of *other* gods, or presume to speak their *own* words instead of the words of God. As God proclaims in Deuteronomy, *everyone* is accountable to God *directly* for heeding the words that the prophet speaks in God's name, and the *prophet* is accountable to God for speaking God's words and no others. So part of the awe and terror here is the terror of getting it wrong, of failing to discern God's words.

Now, it seems to me that we have plenty of would-be prophets today, eager to put themselves out there in politics or social media or what have you, ready to assume a mantle of authority of one kind or another. And we have plenty of people who are eager to find and follow prophets, eager to accept that they have the last word on this, that, and the other, on immigration, on climate catastrophe, on pandemics, on how to make friends and influence people, what to eat, how to sleep, the latest hacks on how to have the energy of a twenty-year-old. We have very *few* prophets and followers-of-prophets who say with Isaiah, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips!" We have very few prophets and followers-of-prophets who speak with the awareness of the burden of speaking in God's name or of listening for God's words, with the burden of this responsibility.

Let's turn to Paul's letter to the Corinthians. The question at issue in this text is whether followers of Jesus can eat food sacrificed to pagan idols. After all, they know that since these idols do not really exist, the food sacrificed to them is just ordinary food. Eating it can then be a way of expressing that these are mere idols. Refraining from eating this food seems to involve conceding that the sacrifices have somehow accomplished some sort of transformation that would render the food dangerous or otherwise problematic for Christians to eat.

I want to ponder this puzzling sentence: "anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the *necessary* knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him." Paul goes on to identify just what it is that his readers claim to know in this case: that no idols really exist, and therefore that food sacrificed to idols is just ordinary food. But he argues that to claim to know *this*, and to insist on one's own knowledge over against someone else's weakness and ignorance, is to lack "the *necessary* knowledge." But what is the "necessary knowledge"? As far as food sacrificed to idols is concerned, Paul goes on to explain that it is not enough to know these things. What is important here is to consider how matters appear *from the perspective of those accustomed to a world of idols*. Even if they are now following Jesus, they are still horrified at the thought of eating food that has been sacrificed to idols. They have a visceral reaction: they feel that eating this food is a betrayal of Jesus. They can't think of this food as just ordinary food. The true knowledge that no idols exist is not the *necessary* knowledge.

What, then, *is* the necessary knowledge? Paul does not tell us directly. Instead, he tells us that anyone who loves God is known by God. That is, the necessary knowledge is *being known by God*; it is not our own knowing. Our own knowing "puffs up, but love builds up." Love builds up because when we love God we love as *God* loves; we love God's finite, fallen, creatures in all their weakness and confusion. We do not steamroller them with our superior knowledge, claiming to have the word of God. Rather, we consider how matters appear from their perspective. And we act in ways that build relationships of love and trust, triangulating patiently from how things appear to them to how things appear to us. We rest in the "*necessary* knowledge," of being known, accepted, loved by God, so we no longer need the ephemeral power that comes from being puffed up by superior knowledge.

Now, what does any of this have to do with Jesus and today's reading from the Gospel of Mark? A lot. In these weeks after Epiphany, we follow Jesus's early life and ministry. Here we are in the very first chapter of Mark's gospel. Jesus has just called the disciples, and now he is launching his ministry. And what does he do? First off, he heads to the synagogue and teaches with authority. That is, he assumes the prophetic mantle, speaking the words of God. Indeed, his authority is such that it slices through the mists of confusion such that even the unclean spirits, the spirits resisting God, recognize him. "I *know* who you are, the Holy One of God." But this knowledge possessed by the unclean spirit is *not* the necessary knowledge that flows from loving God. The unclean spirit sees Jesus as come to destroy. But while knowledge puffs up, overwhelms, lords it over others, love *builds* up. And Jesus is here to build up. His attention is focused on the man who is suffering from the presence of the unclean spirit; he brings him peace, and rest, and freedom from torment. Jesus has the *necessary* knowledge, not his own knowledge but God's knowledge of him. He loves God, and loves God's finite, confused creatures, possessed by unclean spirits, spirits of envy and fear and hunger for power and glory. He is there to love them, to reassure them that their unclean lips cannot separate them from the love of God.

A major theme of the Gospel of Mark is that the disciples do not understand Jesus or what he is up to. They and the people around them are constantly amazed by what Jesus says and does, but they just don't get it. This is just the beginning of Jesus' ministry. All they get right now is that Jesus teaches with prophetic authority. It will take them a long time, just as it takes *us* a long time, really to understand that Jesus *is* the prophetic word of God spoken in response to our unclean lips and unclean spirits, and that this Word is always, always love, that frees and transforms and draws us, too, into the generative life of God.

Jennifer A. Herdt

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28

Preached at St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven