

31st January 2021 Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings

Deuteronomy 18: 15 - 20

Psalm 111

1 Corinthians 8: 1 - 13

Mark 1: 21 - 28

The Preacher and the Word



This lovely chapel at West Burton in Wensleydale, built in the circular worship style loved by John Wesley, has many personal memories. I recall a church steward telling how, when he was a lad some of the men in the congregation sat at the communion rail, right under the pulpit – so close they would not miss a word of the sermon. *'Today,'* he added *'I think they'd sit in the porch if you gave them a chair!'* Maybe they had heard that other old saying, *'The devil always bags the front seat so he (or is it she) can snatch the words before they can reach the congregation!'*

I was raised in the declining atmosphere of a generation which remembered the great preachers and received the discipline of sermon preparation. Monday morning saw the start of preparation for next Sunday's preaching. Throughout the week and sometimes late into Saturday evening, gathered scriptures, study and thoughts were crafted into words with which to feed the hungry flock. People came week by week *to hear a message from the Lord* – expecting God to speak to their need through the worship and the preacher's words.

The pandemic has revealed how the place of preaching has changed. Asked what we had missed most about church being closed on Sunday, many responded – *'the singing and coffee with friends.'* Those things have an important place in worship but we still belong to a church where the Bible takes centre place. It was often carried in to mark the beginning of worship.

It's not difficult to find reasons for the change. They've been given many times in the life of the church – *'times have changed; we live in a different culture; the scriptures are understood in various new ways today; we have so much more knowledge of the texts and backgrounds; people don't listen the same today – they want pictures!'*

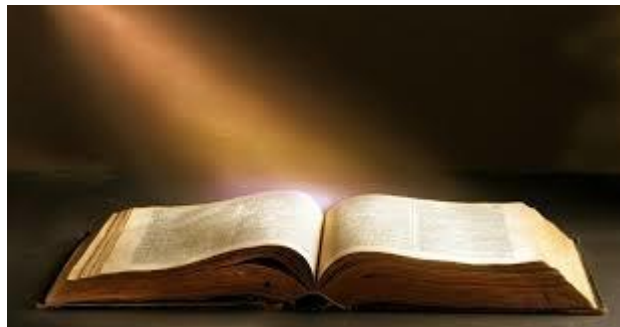
This week's Bible readings may come as a timely correction. Deuteronomy tells how the Israelites had memories of getting close to God speaking when on Mount Sinai his presence and voice were accompanied by fearful volcanic movements, fire and storm, as the ground trembled under their feet. They were afraid to get close enough to hear what God had to say. So it was agreed that God would give them a prophet – a preacher – to make his voice clear.

Preachers! Let's just think of that responsibility when preparing a sermon! The promise was also believed to refer to the prophets of the Old Testament and a preacher from among their own people who would be 'the word' - the Christ! Today's Gospel reading makes that clear.

Jesus is preaching in the Capernaum synagogue. Can you imagine comments from the congregation? *'It's not the way we usually do it? He speaks as though the word is really from God and he believes it! That was a powerful sermon. It made sinners declare themselves, repent and be healed. This lad's going to get himself disliked in some quarters.* He did. They put him on a Cross.

Today's reading from Paul, writing to the church in Corinth, tells how the first church followed a pattern for learning what God said about particular issues. They had a problem about buying meat in the market. Some of it may have earlier been offered to idols in a pagan temple. What did God say about this? From their scriptures they knew God desired holiness in every way. They interpreted this in the spirit of Jesus and his words – by love (1 Cor. 8.1) Then they acted on it in the best interests of the weakest among them. That leaves us with a simple maxim for listening to God - *Take the word, preach the word, live the word!*

I suspect it's a while since we had a Sunday morning like that one in Capernaum. It would be something different to talk about over coffee.



A Prayer (from Psalm 111)

Lord, how wonderful the things you do and say
You are holy and mighty; kind and merciful;
We can trust your words:
Like people of old we can be delighted by them;
comforted, guided and changed by them.
Give us understanding by your Holy Spirit.