

The Fourth Sunday of Epiphany

February 1, 2009

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Psalm 111

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The synagogue is still there, or so it is supposed. Capernaum and all that it contained is gone now. But the ruins are there at a place called *Tel Hum* in Arabic or *Tal Nahum* in Hebrew on the shore in the far northwest of the Sea of Galilee. There are two ruins that would be pointed out to you if you traveled there: one would be the stone foundation of a building known as the house of the Apostle Peter; the other is the synagogue.

Of course, it has been changed over time. At some point columns of an ornate style were added as an improvement. They still stand at one side of the roofless ruins. Looking beyond them, looking beyond the centuries of change, you can see the foundation wall of the synagogue, perhaps the very one that Jesus knew, solid stone walls three feet thick.

The synagogue He knew was a substantial building in a substantial village. Try to see it in your mind; take a seat on one of the benches against the stone wall. The air is heavy with the dust of years of use: the light is from small windows set high in the wall, long slanting rays filled with the mist of that dust. You can hear the muffled sounds of the activity of the village beyond the thick walls. And it's warm,

comfortably warm, and you feel comfortable in such a familiar place with all your fellow villagers – and you feel a little sleepy.

Today there's a guest speaker, Mary and Joseph's boy, Jesus from Nazareth; apparently he's relocated, new in town. Of course the Rabbi has to ask him to read and say something about the reading, that's the custom, but it's usually pretty bad, long expositions of the same things, over and over. Everything there is to say has been said before. The Scribes have said it all; Torah is a closed book. Just settle back and let the nice, comfortable sense of predictable comfort lull you. It can't last all that long.

Today is different from all others. This Jesus speaks with authority, a new teaching filled with power, personal, immediate. This Jesus breaks the tradition of the Scribes, a tradition that one commentary calls "the prison house of quotation marks," and speaks with personal conviction.

It's astonishing. You are astonished; everyone is astonished.

So, the question arises: what has happened over these past several thousand years? Why do we, as Christians not astonish the world with this message? Have we ourselves ceased to be astonished? Have we placed this new message, this Gospel message from Jesus in "quotation marks"? Do we really understand what Jesus tells us?

Perhaps we just get it all out of the proper order, the proper sequence. Do you see what happens in that synagogue? First, it's his teaching, the powerful, personal, experiential sharing of the Gospel, and all that it implies for us all. What does it imply: that faith begins with a passive, receptive understanding that we are God's children in every sense, that the key to our Christian faith is not first that we love, but that we know we are loved?

Then, comes the healing, the driving away of demons, the act of giving witness to that love. It follows, must follow, that teaching so that any lingering "quotation marks" are erased.

The problem is that we leap right to the action and fail to take the time to savor Jesus' teaching; we push right on, with the very best of intentions. Lest you think I just said that we don't have to do anything with our faith, wrong: we are called to service, service of God in this world at this time, but, if we do not take the time to be filled with God's loving presence, to really know His love, how can we possibly tell others about it? If we do not live with immediacy of God in our lives, how can we represent Him to the world?

It's all here for us; Jesus' teaching did not end that day in Capernaum. He is still teaching us today, calling us to listen, astonishing us with the experience of God, then sending us out to grapple with the demons of this world.

In His Holy Name.