

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany**Deut. 18:15-20****I Cor. 8:1-13****Mark 1:21-28**

Epiphany marks the first out-shine of Jesus' ministry, and in Series B the Sundays after Epiphany, which can number up to eight in the new ILCW calendar, consist of readings from the first two chapters of Mark (only Epiphany II breaks this Markan pattern). Epiphany I = the baptism of Jesus; Epiphany III = call of the first disciples; Epiphany IV = the first miracle, an exorcism; Epiphany V = healing of diseases, casting out of more demons; Epiphany VI = cleansing of a leper; Epiphany VII = forgiving and healing a paralytic; Epiphany VIII = a discussion of fasting and the radical newness of the kingdom.

The Gospel for Epiphany IV speaks of Jesus' unique authority. A demon trapped inside a man challenges Jesus even while he has to admit that Jesus is the Holy One of God. Everyone standing around seems utterly baffled by this Jesus, and the miraculous exorcism only increases their frustration and astonishment. Scholars have noted that the demons — of all "people" — seem to know exactly who Jesus is while the disciples — of all people — seem to consistently misunderstand him in Mark. Light finally dawns only at the cross. When the centurion sees how Jesus breathed his last, he confessed: "Truly this man was the Son of God (15:39).

There is a temptation to use Epiphany for succumbing to a theology of glory, to be dazzled by all the power of Jesus

miracles and the brilliance of Transfiguration, or to imagine that in these lessons we have the kind of proofs for God's existence that will make the Christian mission a dazzling success.

Yet the high drama of his miracles only points to the real locus of his authority: "The Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). In that service, in his unflinching martyr's death, and in the vindication granted through the resurrection, the beleaguered Christians who made up Mark's original audience found meaning, hope, and real authority.

The demonic spirit recognized what the Messiah, Jesus, was really up to: he had come to destroy the demons (v. 24). Another way to develop the theme of this Sunday, then, is to show how Jesus came to roll back the demons and all their ways. Consequently, the Church's mission during Epiphany is not just to win new people to faith in God; it is also to join her Lord in fighting illness, injustice, poverty, violence, and all other signs of the dogged but doomed life of the "demons." This "mission to the whole society" is as inescapable a part of our mission and ministry as it was of our Lord's.

The fame of Jesus that spread throughout all the region of Galilee (v. 28) may not have been a good thing in Mark's eyes. That fame only reflected the kind of awe people felt about any spirit-filled man. Only those who have seen the cross recognize the full nature of the authority that is clear as day to the demon. God, give us eyes to see!

Ralph W. Klein
