

Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany
Cycle B RCL

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

The Deuteronomic legislation is a thorough reformation of Israel's legal system undertaken during the reign of King Josiah (639-609 BCE), and the present reading stems from the section dealing with prophets. Throughout Israel's history false prophets had misled Israel into trespass, nevertheless the author believes the institution of prophecy is valid and that true prophets are recognizable in that the prophet will speak in the Lord's name (verse 20) and the prophecy will actually come true (18:22).

Psalm 111

After the opening Hallelujah, this Psalm is an *acrostic*, *i. e.* the first verse begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet (*alef*), and each verse thereafter begins with a succeeding letter of the alphabet. This aids in memorization but is somewhat limiting as a poetic device. Formally a *hymn*, this psalm is unusual among the hymns in containing specific thanksgivings for the good things God has done for Israel instead of for God's cosmic majesty and deeds. This suggests a different function in the Temple liturgy from that of the other hymns.

1 Corinthians 8:1b-13

Paul's opponents in Corinth claim that their Christianity gives them an esoteric "knowledge" (Greek: *gnosis*) that enables them to exercise extraordinary spiritual gifts. Paul counters that possession of such *gnosis* would only serve to bolster divisive pride and consequently cannot be part of the authentic faith of Christians. The problem of food offered to idols was a serious issue for Christians in most Greco-Roman cities where the principal source of fresh meat in the markets was meat offered in local temples and then sold after cooking on the altar. As a practical matter, in a large city like Corinth, to reject such meat often meant that one would have to eat a vegetarian diet. Paul's enemies flaunted their "knowledge" that the gods of these temples are not real and conspicuously consumed meat offered on their altars, often to the shock and horror of some Christians. Paul, while agreeing that the gods are not real, suggests that the unity of the community requires sensitivity to Christians who may not completely understand the faith.

Mark 1:21-28

The present synagogue in Capernaum is a reconstruction of a fourth-century synagogue but may very well rest on the foundations of the synagogue where Jesus taught. Before the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE synagogues were principally Jewish community centers where people might gather for important public functions and to study and pray together. Unclean spirits were considered to be incomplete beings, souls without bodies, and first-century magical lore is replete with formulas for getting rid of them. All such formulas involve the invocation of a high god to drive the spirit away from an afflicted person. The author of this Gospel has Jesus dismiss the demons without such invocation, thus stressing Jesus' power as Son of God. Throughout Mark, the demons, who are aligned with Satan and the powers of the underworld, recognize Jesus and seek to drive him away. In this way the author portrays Jesus' ministry as a direct encounter with the forces of the underworld.