

Year B

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

When Moses' time on earth had come to an end the compiler of the book of Deuteronomy wrote: "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face."¹ That's some epitaph, isn't it?

On two occasions I have stood in a pulpit and announced to a congregation that I would be leaving for another charge. I remember a wiser, older colleague once

¹ Deuteronomy 34:10

telling me that when you announce that you are leaving some folks will be upset and some folks will be relieved; some folks will be surprised and other folks will have seen it coming. But whenever you announce it, get on with it because there's nothing worse than bumping into someone in the street one day who greets you with the words: "are you still here?" Or to put it another way; "Here's your hat, what's your hurry?!"

In the Old Testament reading today Moses intimated that the day was coming when he would be on his way. He wasn't for hanging around either. It was going to happen

quickly and the people would have to learn to adjust to their new circumstances. But they were very fragile; they were doubtful that the goal of their journey would be reached even though they were right on the brink of their journey's end. They were right to be edgy because without further prophetic guidance they would be in peril and they knew it. The significance of the prophet, and the people's desire to have one, raised the question; 'where do we find a God who seems to be absent?' You see, the reference to the fiery, terrifying encounter with God at Horeb was not what was bothering the people now.

Experiences like that were few and far between. It was the long, almost deathly silences that bothered them.

It had been a rather stormy board meeting and some very harsh things had been said. One man--always highly respected and unusually wise in his judgments--had said nothing throughout the proceedings. Suddenly one of the leaders in the argument turned to him: "You have not said a word. I am sure we would all like to hear your opinion about this matter." "I have discovered," replied the quiet one, "that there

are many times when silence is an opinion.”²

God is either often silent or he appears silent in the midst of the racket our minds are creating! We do not hear very well and so we need help. We need help from one of us who knows us inside out; knows our struggles and our heartaches, knows our thought processes, knows the things that bear down on us and make life a challenge. Do you remember the Joan Osborne song of a few years back?

“What if God was one of us?
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus
Tryin' to make his way home?”

² Bits & Pieces, September, 1989.

If God had a face what would it look like?
And would you want to see if, seeing meant
That you would have to believe in things like
heaven
And in Jesus and the saints, and all the
prophets?³

The lyrics are somewhat cumbersome, in my view, but they are reaching into the heart of what this passage in Deuteronomy is all about. We struggle to hear or see God so we need the one who is going to act as an intermediary and speak for us and help us to receive from God: we cannot do it on our own. The words ‘hear’, ‘listen’ and ‘heed’

³ <http://www.metrolyrics.com/what-if-god-was-one-of-us-lyrics-joan-osborne.html>

occur in the Bible passage and they all translate the one Hebrew word, 'shema'.

“Shema Yisra'el Adonai Elohenu Adonai echad.”

“Hear, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.”

The Shema is one of only two prayers that are specifically commanded in the Law of Moses (the other is Birkat Ha-Mazon -- grace after meals). It is the oldest fixed daily prayer in Judaism, recited morning and night since ancient times. The first part of the Shema begins with one of the best-known, most fundamental expressions of Jewish belief,

and the one from which this prayer gets its name: Shema Yisra'el... (Hear, Israel). And it is that eternal imperative that echoes through our text in Deuteronomy today. Hear, listen, take heed. It's not merely a matter of receiving what is offered. It's a matter of responding to what is said and that is why the punishment is so severe for those who choose not to listen to the words of the true prophet, for these are the words of God. There is no mention of a priest or a king because a prophet does not need a priest or a king to legitimise his or her words. These are the words of God.

The remarkable passage in Mark's Gospel today records Jesus' appearance in the synagogue. He taught them with authority and they were amazed. He cast out the unclean spirit and they were amazed at his authority. Here was a prophet who fitted the bill! He came from among them. He was one of them. He demanded to be heard because he spoke with authority and his "shema", his call to be heard demanded that the listener took seriously what he said. If they wouldn't do that then there would be terrifying consequences as the fiery voice of God thundered and the prophet *par excellence*,

the embodiment of God, was slaughtered by them in their midst. How terrible for them all.

For centuries people believed that Aristotle was right when he said that the heavier an object, the faster it would fall to earth. Aristotle was regarded as the greatest thinker of all time, and surely he would not be wrong. Anyone, of course, could have taken two objects, one heavy and one light, and dropped them from a great height to see whether or not the heavier object landed first. But no one did until nearly 2,000 years after Aristotle's death. In 1589 Galileo

summoned learned professors to the base of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Then he went to the top and pushed off a ten pound and a one-pound weight. Both landed at the same instant. The power of belief was so strong, however, that the professors denied their eyesight. They continued to say Aristotle was right.⁴

It is very important that we learn to develop minds that are open to God. It is possible for the most devout of people to have their ears covered. Where do we find a God who appears to be absent. We can only begin

⁴ Bits & Pieces, January 9, 1992, pp. 22-23.

with ourselves, removing those things that get in the way of a clear perception of God and his ways. Jesus, the prophet like Moses, has come and through his Spirit we are able to hear him and know him. Let us actively take heed and follow. Amen.