

There is a certain irony or tension in our disdain for authoritarian regimes and yet our desire to have leaders who speak with authority. And this tension or ambivalence, applies as much to the Church as to our political life. Interestingly, one of the marks of a true prophet – of one, that is, who speaks truly, with authority – is a certain hesitation on their part to do so. One thinks of Isaiah and Ezekiel and Moses and many others at the beginning of their ministry. And their hesitation is not, firstly, because they fear the people but that they fear God:

*Woe is me. I am lost
for I am a man of unclean lips
and I live among a people of unclean lips
and my eyes have seen the king, the Lord Sabaoth. (Is.6:5)*

To see God is to die, such was their understanding; and we hear an echo of that in today's passage from Deuteronomy:

'Do not let me hear again' you said, 'the voice of the Lord my God Nor look any longer on this great fire, or I shall die.'

So God provides prophets, instead, to stand between God and the people, to act as mediators; and this is costly, as Moses so well knows. It's not a task to be taken up lightly. Indeed, in Moses' case, his hesitation causes God to choose Aaron as a spokesman to get him started, as it were.

Pope Francis, too, is a reluctant prophet because he 'fears' God as much as 'man'. In his own words, pondering what we are to do in the face of all our present difficulties, especially, but not only, the pandemic, he says,

Of course, we hesitate, faced with so much suffering, who does not balk? It is fine to tremble a little. Fear of the mission can, in fact, be a sign of the Holy Spirit. We feel at once both inadequate to the task and called to it. There is a warmth in our hearts that reassures us the Lord is asking us to follow him. (p.21. Let Us Dream)

He goes on to explore this hesitation as an opportunity to wait on the Lord, to experience something of the helplessness of our true condition before God so that God has a chance to guide us into new possibilities which we have not already thought of, constrained as we are by our own limited understanding:

I described these possibilities as 'overflow' because they often burst the banks of our thinking. Overflow happens when we humbly set before God the challenge we face, and ask for help. We call this 'discernment of spirits' because it is ourselves learning what is of God and what is seeking to frustrate His will. (p.61)

Something of this dynamic is present in the life of Jesus. One hears something of it, perhaps, in that curt response to his mother at the marriage feast of Cana when she tells him they have no wine:

What is that to me and to you, woman? My hour has not yet come.

But act he does, and with authority. And I wonder whether the possessed man in today's gospel passage isn't carrying out a similar function: a spur to action which reveals, not only to us, but to Jesus himself, who he really is. For there is a cosmic dimension to what is going on; not an equality of conflict, as was suggested in the reading at the Vigil last night, but the revelation of a power which sustains and constrains everything: the power of a personal God who finally does away with the mediation of prophets to stand among us, instead, in the person of his Son: a Son who 'fears' God in the sense of respecting him as a father, and 'fears' to act in the sense of respecting our freedom to be ourselves, to suffer the limitations of being human. This 'fear', however, is only the first step, even the first *sign* of love, with all its constraints as well as freedom, and I wonder whether Paul isn't working his way around this issue, too, in his First Letter to the Corinthians. Better to be free to serve the Lord, than married. But what then of community? Discernment again is needed and a call to follow the warmth in one's own heart.

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