The Unity of Teaching and Action in God's Service

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Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Sunday Readings for January 29, 2012 for Cycle B:
Dt 18:15-20; Ps 95; 1 Cor 7:32-35; Mk 1:21-28

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How do people in our society perceive the relation between words and deeds, between teaching and example? On the one hand, some leaders and other teachers seem to advocate "freedom" and "rights" of the individual without any mention of duty or responsibility for the person's actions. Yet the same people -- or those who follow their lead -- are shocked by the evidence of crass selfishness and the disdain for property and life itself in our society. Somehow the tragedies that flow from immaturity and self-centeredness seem to be anomalies. But what else would follow from lawlessness?

The vision of life portrayed in the Bible stresses, among other things, the necessary link between words and deeds, instruction and example. In fact, the same Hebrew term "dabhar" can mean word, thing and event.

God's plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them. By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of humanity is made clear to us in Christ, who is the Mediator and at the same time the fullness of all revelation (Vatican Council II, Divine Revelation #2).

In ancient Israel the summit of the community's experience of God came at Mount Sinai. After God liberated the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, the revelation of the divine will and of the divine majesty came in words which were mediated to the ordinary people by Moses. The Book of Deuteronomy, reflecting a final address of Moses to the new generation of Israelites just before his death and their entry into the promised land, stressed the continuing need for properly constituted leaders and teachers. Elijah and Jeremiah would be depicted as partially fulfilling the promise that God would raise up a prophet like Moses, and would put his words into his mouth. As the centuries passed and many teachers proved inadequate, the Jewish people kept alive the hope for a new Moses. The Gospel writers have this passage in mind as they describe the works and teachings of Jesus.

From the time of Solomon, the Temple in Jerusalem and its priests always held a central role in the mediation of Israel's experience of God and the elucidation of the divine will. However, because the Jewish people were scattered far and wide during the centuries before the time of Jesus, the synagogue was instituted as a context for prayer and teaching. There was no competition between synagogue and Temple, because the latter was the exclusive place for sacrificial worship.
As was the custom for Jewish men, Jesus frequented the synagogue on the Sabbath, so when he settled in Capernaum "he entered the synagogue and taught", undoubtedly after taking his turn at reading the texts prescribed for that sabbath. The people often heard teachers of the day present their message, probably based on the texts of the given sabbath or feast; with due humility, these scribes quoted their predecessors and set their instruction within the context of tradition. Jesus, however, spoke with the authority of one who communed directly with God, as did Moses and the other prophets of old. Listeners were astonished because they considered prophecy to be in abeyance until the final days.

Mark does not indicate the content of Jesus' teaching but immediately records a deed of mercy toward a man afflicted with an unclean spirit. Thus the Gospel emphasizes that divine revelation does two things: the message inspires, uplifts and challenges the community and it becomes the basis for healing those who are in need of wholeness so that they may exercise their human dignity in the service of God and neighbor. The promise of a prophet like Moses was followed by a command: "To him you shall listen" (Deut. 18:15). Jesus not only inspired his audience, but also showed them deeds that overthrew the power of sin and Satan. This is the foundation for restoration of God's law and order to all segments of human society. Today we must recognize the demons that are enslaving us and our contemporaries so that people can be brought to Christ for healing. Then the privileges of our human dignity will be appreciated in their relation to our call to imitate Christ in his revelation of divine love.