

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;

those who act accordingly have a good understanding;

his praise endures for ever.”

There is a theme that runs through all of our readings this week.

The theme is authority;

where does it come from

and what are its proper limits.

The book of Deuteronomy

was written as the last words of Moses to the Hebrew people

before their invasion of the Promise Land,

and so there is a gravity to these words.

Deuteronomy lays out how the Promised Land

will be different from the countries that surround it;

how the Chosen People will behave differently

from the people that surround them.

In the section we hear this morning

Moses is telling the people

that God will continue to honor the covenant that God made with them.

The people had cried out in fear at the mountain of Horeb

and begged that they never have to see God face to face,

never have to hear God’s words directly again.

And so God will provide them with an intermediary,

a prophet,

a human face for God.

It is a covenant

that God will eventually take to its ultimate conclusion,

in the sending of Jesus Christ to live among us,  
as the incarnate word,  
the human face of God.

This is a small passage, but there is much to chew on.

Notice how God tells the Hebrews, through Moses,  
that the prophets to come, will be raised up from among them.

Though Moses was a Jew, of sorts,  
remember that he came from the outside.

Though born of a slave, he was not a slave  
and came to the Hebrews to rescue them from slavery.

The next prophets, God says, will come from the Hebrews,  
will be raised up out of them.

In an irony not missed on us Anglicans,  
God is telling the Hebrews  
that if they want to hear the word of God  
they will need to listen to each other.

And working together  
they will need to discern who is speaking the word of God  
and who isn't.

And lest they think they are getting off easy,  
Moses reminds them as well,  
that woe be to the one who hears the word of God and does not obey,  
or is given the word of God in his or her heart  
and does not speak it to the community.

And woe be also to the one who speaks the words of his own heart  
and passes them off as the word of God.

Moses is telling the people he has led through the desert for forty years  
that though they are about to enter the Promised Land,  
the road ahead will be far more difficult.

If they are to continue to hear the word of God,  
merely remembering the words of old will not be enough.

They will need to listen carefully to each other  
with open minds and discerning ears,  
for God is not done talking.

In the section of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians that was read today,  
we hear Paul expounding on a similar theme,  
but adding a new twist.

One of the things we all too often try to wring out of the Bible  
is an absolute answer,  
something we can apply easily without need for interpretation,  
the myth behind the trite phrase  
"God said it. I believe it. That settles it."  
That is just a lazy persons pipe dream.

What Paul is telling us, and Moses too for that matter,  
is that the word of God demands our participation;  
our engagement.

As an old rabbi is said to have put it,  
"Of course scripture has multiple meanings.  
God wrote it.  
How could it be any other way!"

The Bible is not a book of easy answers,  
it is a book of wisdom;  
principles that we can use to guide us to the right answers.  
Though what it contains is surely absolute truth,  
the answers it draws out of us  
are different for different people at different times,  
and that is how it should be.  
That is the way it was meant to be.

That is only one of the reasons why the Bible continues to be relevant,  
even to this day.

The example that Paul uses to stress this point to the people of Corinth,  
is his discourse on the eating of the food  
that has been used in the sacrifices to foreign gods or idols.

In Corinth, a very cosmopolitan city,

there were many different religions and many different gods.

Food donated to various different temples

would often be sold back to the market

as an alternate means of monetary support for the temple,

and so if one was being meticulous,

it was often difficult to know for sure,

whether the food that you bought at the market

was actually ritually clean or not.

Paul's answer is not absolute one way or the other,

but takes into account all the people involved.

Let me be clear.

Though not absolute, there is a definite answer;

it just changes depending on the people involved.

The people involved must engage themselves, and those around them,

in the process of discerning God's will for them.

This is not an easy task.

It is hard work.

It is also the same work that lies before us in our own day as well.

This is the work that we name Reason

in the Anglican three legged stool of God's revelation to us

– Scripture, Tradition, and Reason.

It is the very real hard work of living out our faith day by day.

Of listening in our hearts for the still small voice of God

behind the cacophony of our own inner ramblings,  
and speaking out that word when the need arises,  
while at the same time listening  
with open ears and hearts  
to the voice of others  
as we discern the voice of God amid the words of the other.  
We cannot afford to either accept or reject anything at face value.  
They must be engaged and discerned and applied to our lives,  
whether it is the word of God we receive through the Bible,  
the word of God lived out in the traditions of the church,  
the word of God received from more modern prophets,  
or the word of God made incarnate in Jesus Christ.  
This is the covenant God made with the people of God,  
what we asked for so many years ago.  
It is the covenant that God still lovingly upholds,  
even to this day.  
It is up to us to uphold our end of the bargain;  
to do the hard work of discerning the word of God  
that is sent to us all the time.  
Discerning is not easy.  
It never was.  
It never will be.  
Isn't it interesting in our Gospel this morning,  
that the demons know Christ instantly,  
while the disciples,  
and the rest of us for that matter,  
are only amazed and wonder if it might really be true.  
Is it not a wonder,  
that with proper discernment one can learn the truth,

even from an unclean spirit?

Never be afraid to watch and listen,

For observing carefully is the beginning of wonder.

Never be afraid to wonder,

For wonder is the beginning of inquiry.

Never be afraid to ask questions,

For questioning is the beginning of discernment.

Never forget our duty to discern the word of the Lord,

For the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Amen.