

4th Sunday of Year

I am sure that many of you have at some time seen one or more of the Indiana Jones films. They are great adventure stories however implausible the plot. In most of them there is an underlying theme. There is a great and mysterious power that human beings meddle with at their peril. In the last of the series it is an alien force, but in the Raiders of the Lost Ark and the Last Crusade it is quite explicitly the power of God. They pick up an Old Testament theme that no one can see the face of God and live. This theme is given voice by Moses in our first reading. After his encounter with the Lord on Mount Sinai amid thunder and lightning the people are afraid. Through Moses God tells them that in future he will speak to them through a human intermediary – a prophet like Moses – who will bring them his message.

Down the centuries a number of prophets were sent to speak to the people. Some, like Elijah and Elisha, we know of through the historical books of the Bible. Others, such as Isaiah and Jeremiah had their words written down and these are preserved in the prophetic books. However by the time of Christ there had been no prophet in centuries although the people still lived in hope. Instead they had teachers, the scribes, who passed on the teaching of previous generations and interpreted it. But they spoke on the authority of their forebears not on their own authority.

Jesus is different. He speaks with authority. The word is different from ‘power’ – ‘dunamis’ – which means an inherent strength whether physical or spiritual. The word ‘exousia’ means an executive authority given to him to carry out a responsibility – the same word that is used of government authorities. The Father has given Jesus a role to play and all the authority he needs to carry it out. In the language of St John’s Gospel he is the Word made flesh and dwelling among us. He does not simply hand on a message like the scribes. He IS God. God speaks and acts with all his power through the human nature of the Son. This is a truth that the crowds have difficulty in grasping but the evil spirits understand immediately. “I know who you are; the Holy One of God”. Evil cannot hold its ground in the presence of God and flees. The same power will be at work in his healing miracles as he embarks on his public ministry.

When we turn to Jesus we don’t simply hear a morally powerful message about how to live. We encounter the living God who comes to us with a human face so that we may know and love him rather than obey him out of fear. He wants us to open our hearts to him and trust him so that he can work wonders in our lives too. We could accept and live by his teachings simply because they make sense to us – that would be a start – but invites us to further by putting our faith in him even when we do not understand what he wants or it goes against our natural human promptings. In the film Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade there is a scene where Indiana Jones has to cross a great chasm and his sheet of clues tells him that the just man steps out in faith. He steps out and discovers a glass bridge which takes him across the void.

Sometimes what we want is not God’s will or way forward, however obvious it might seem to us. But we must never fear that God is uninterested or lacks the power to help us. He is with us here and now at Mass. The priest does not have a magical power or ‘dunamis’ by which he makes him present. Rather through the sacrament of ordination God gives him ‘exousia’ – authority. The priest provides the lips and vocal chords to say “This is my body...this is my blood” but Jesus the Word uses these to transform bread and wine into his living presence. Our Lord comes among us at every Mass with the same power and authority that we see in St Mark’s Gospel. This is why the Mass is the greatest and most powerful prayer of the Church. Subjectively we may feel distracted, downcast, even bored or put off by the externals or those around us. Objectively and seen with the eyes of faith we are at the beating heart of the universe in the living presence of the Holy One of God who can answer all our prayers and free us from every fear, anxiety or need.