

# Lesson 14

## Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

### The Holy Gospel: Mark 1:21–28

One significant result of the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, and the exile of the Jews in Babylonia was the development of the synagogue. The Jews in exile could not go to Jerusalem to worship; besides, the temple was in ruins. The sacrifices and rituals were not even possible. So the faithful gathered in groups to read and discuss the sacred Scriptures, to sing psalms, to pray, and to praise the Lord. In time, this practice was formalized. It became the rule that a community with at least 10 Jewish heads of households was to have a synagogue, an “assembly house.” Larger cities had more than one. By Jesus’ time, the practice of going to the synagogue for worship and study on the Sabbath was firmly established. As a boy, Jesus received formal instruction in the sacred Scriptures at the synagogue. As a Jew, Luke tells us, it was Jesus’ “custom [to go] to the synagogue on the Sabbath day” (4:16).

192. How was the development of the synagogue a distinct blessing for the Jews? What does Jesus’ habitual attendance at the synagogue encourage in us?

The synagogue did not have designated readers of Scripture. Any capable man might be invited by the elected rulers of the synagogue to read and explain the sacred writings. Distinguished guests were regularly honored in this way. Synagogue services centered on reading and explaining and discussing Scripture and included singing of psalms and a time of prayer. They provided the pattern for the worship of the early Christians.

As Jesus traveled from village to village in Galilee and His reputation as a rabbi grew, the synagogues were the logical places for Him to initiate contact with people. Having left Nazareth after being rejected there because He applied messianic Scripture to Himself and His ministry, and having made Capernaum His headquarters, He went “immediately,” “at first opportunity,” to the synagogue.

193. Why were the people amazed at Jesus’ authoritative manner of teaching? How may today’s preachers and teachers of the Word be similarly authoritative as they carry out their functions in the Church?

“Immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, ‘What have You to do with us . . . ? Have You come to destroy us?’ ”

194. Why did Jesus immediately silence the man and not allow that kind of testimony to continue?

195. What impact did Jesus' healing of the man by exorcising the evil spirit have on the Capernaum community? What does the miracle say to us today?

## **The Old Testament Lesson: Deuteronomy 18:15–20**

This text was recognized by Jewish scholars as messianic in character. Moses promised that the Lord would raise up a prophet like him, one to whom the people would be ready, willing, and able to listen, because of the nature of His person and His message. “The Prophet” was one of the designations used to refer to the Promised One.

“Horeb” is Mount Horeb—or Mount Sinai—also referred to as “the mountain of God.” It was on Horeb that the Lord appeared to Moses in the burning bush to call him to his mission. One of the assurances the Lord gave Moses was that later the people of Israel would worship Him on this mountain (see Exodus 3:12). It was to Horeb, then, that Moses, under God's direction, led the Israelites when they were freed with great signs and wonders from slavery in Egypt. There the Lord spoke to Moses and to the people and reaffirmed with them as a nation the covenant He had made with their fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (see Exodus 19:3–8). At Horeb, the Lord thundered His moral law, the Ten Commandments, to the people gathered at the mountain's base (see Exodus 20:18–23).

196. Why did the people not want the Lord to speak to them directly anymore? Why would it be all right for the Lord to speak to them through Moses?

197. What qualities would “the Prophet” have that would allow and encourage Israel to listen to Him? What message was “the Prophet” to bring to God's people?

198. What would be the responsibility of those who would hear Him?

Both the Old and the New Testaments carry strong warnings against false prophets. As the Church formalized its doctrines on the basis of these Scriptures, it was concerned that heresy, false teachings that distort or detract from the Gospel, be identified and rejected. The Lutheran Confessions were composed in a similar manner, saying, “We believe and teach . . .” and “We reject and condemn. . . .”

199. Why is it urgent that the Church safeguard its doctrines by insisting that its prophets (preachers, teachers) remain faithful to the inspired Word?

200. How can we put a person's teachings to the test? (See 1 John 4:1–6; Matthew 7:15–20.)

201. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

## **The Epistle for the Day: 1 Corinthians 8:1–13**

To understand what Paul wrote here, we must consider the context and the social setting. The Christians of Corinth had come out of a pagan society. The city had many temples dedicated to pagan gods, and participation in pagan worship rites had been part of their former lifestyle. Sacrifices were offered to these gods, but usually they were only partly used in the temple, and the remainder of the meat was sold to butchers, who sold it in the public market. Some of the Christians had conscience scruples about eating meat that had been dedicated to pagan gods. They thought that such an act would be, to an extent, “worshiping” them again. So they refrained from buying and eating such meat, and they thought everyone in the congregation should be expected to refrain from doing so. Others in the congregation did not share their conscience scruples. They just bought the meat and ate it without worrying about its prior use. In the opposite extreme, some even thought that they were free to continue to join their friends in the sociability of the feasts in the pagan temples, as long as down deep, they believed in Jesus as their Savior (see 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1). These contrasting understandings and attitudes had resulted in considerable tension and conflict within the congregation, so this was one of the questions about which they had written to Paul.

202. Paul stated both the problem and its solution in a few words: “‘Knowledge’ puffs up, but love builds up.” What warning is implicit in his “If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know”?

203. What encouragement and direction did he give with his “If anyone loves God, he is known by God”? (See 1 John 4:7–12.)

204. First Paul dealt with the matter of knowledge and its application to the question in the life of the congregation. To help them all gain greater knowledge and understanding, what did Paul tell them about pagan idols?

As the son of pious Jewish parents, Paul had no doubt been conditioned to develop an attitude of strong aversion to the pagan world and its “graven images.”

205. Do you think Paul had conscience scruples about buying such meat and eating it?

Next Paul expanded on the importance of exercising love to provide the atmosphere in which tensions, such as these about eating such meat, could be resolved and all could be helped.

206. Why did he refer to those with conscience scruples about eating the meat as “the weak”? How did he, in love and concern for them, try to help them become stronger? Why was he so concerned that they not be put into situations in which they might go against their consciences?

207. Paul’s words become instruction for us in our appreciation of and application of our Christian freedom. He valued knowledge, but what did he value more in Christian interaction? What limits does love place on our Christian freedom?

208. What situations in today’s Church and world require the same kind of application of love and a voluntary limiting of our freedoms?