

Deuteronomy 18: 15-20
Revelation 12: 1-5a
Mark 1: 21-28

This week, I began a new lecture series at the University – a course for undergraduates on development, international development if you prefer.

So, I rather enjoyed the opening lines of our reading from Mark's gospel (it brought on a wry smile!):

“They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority”

I wish!

But Jesus, who is God, the One we follow as Christians, taught as one having authority – not like the scribes, not like anyone else.

We heard that in today's gospel.

How do we – I wonder – detect, discern those things that are of God in our world today? Those who speak with an authority, which is of God.

The prophetic voice in a confusing world, where there's so much clamouring for our attention.

They say a few funny things about prophets and how to recognise them, and how not.

(That's what they are talking about in our reading from Deuteronomy.)

How do you know a prophet from a false teacher?

One of the things they say is that if a person keeps telling you they are a prophet, then they are probably not. I knew someone like that once.

Self-publicising is probably not the hallmark of a prophet!

But it gets complicated – as the bible can attest. The prophet Micah in 1 Kings claims that the other prophets have been intentionally deceived by God in order to trick the King, with the implication that even a prophet who speaks in the name of God, and genuinely thinks what they are saying is of God, may in fact be a false prophet.

Tricky!

Our reading from Mark's gospel, where we heard of Jesus' casting out the unclean spirit and our reading from the Revelation of John the Divine, where we have this graphic image of a woman in labour, about to give birth, “clothed with the sun”, and with a red dragon circling round...

These two readings have something interesting in common if we are thinking about how we discern God at work in the world, in the communities of which we are part, and in our own lives.

And what they have in common – remarkably – is convulsions, crying out. Birth pangs (in Revelation) – the agony of giving birth.

And more disturbing still, Revelation speaks of the imminent birth of a child, with a dragon standing by, waiting to devour it “as soon as it [is] born”.

New life at risk of being snuffed out.

It is strange. It's edgy. It's unnatural. It's threatening.

So, what does this tell us about discerning God in the world?

What are the writers of both Mark's gospel and Revelation trying to say?

We perhaps get a clearest sense of an answer from studying Revelation but it is there in Mark's gospel too.

In Revelation, there is a strong, strong sense of the corruption of the world – in stark contrast to God's heavenly realm.

And I don't just mean 'corruption' in the sense that the World Bank or the British government like to speak of it.

Those 'nasty countries' over there – not us, we're clean, we're beyond reproach, which is how the contemporary corruption discourse operates.

No, what Revelation has in mind is a corruption of an entirely different magnitude, where things really are warped.

Where truth is turned on its head.

Where powerful people tell us that the cat is white when we all can see the cat is black.

It is the kind of corruption that is so ubiquitous that we scarcely notice it any more.

We are all tainted.

It is this kind of world that the author of Revelation is conjuring up, but envisaging that when God's reign comes, it will be swept away, reversed.

Mark's gospel too.

The man with the unclean spirit – analogous to a disordered world, if you like. Cast out. Reversed.

But this transformation, this move from the old order to the new one does not just happen quietly, peaceably. Far from it.

What we are hearing is that it involves rupture...a wrench...struggle...birth pangs...convulsions.

The old order – whether it is the things that hold us back in our lives or the deceit and corruption of the world...

Its clings on, resists change, even if in the end the victory is assured.

And it is into this mire – with battle lines drawn – that the One who teaches with authority, speaks.

And there is a profound connection between what he speaks and what he can do.

When Jesus speaks he sees through the untruths of the world, the deceits and the lies. The things that are out of kilter.

That's why his teaching is authoritative.

The principalities and powers hate it when Jesus speak because they are shown up.

Their darkness and deceit are brought into the light.

And there is nothing they can do about it when the One who teaches with authority speaks.

“He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”

And Jesus' teaching is transformative.

The out of kilter world is righted.

That is the vision of the Revelation of John. It's what lies behind Mark's gospel too.

It is the Christian vision.

The power of Jesus to transform, to right our out of kilter world.

So, I wonder, whether when we seek to discern Jesus at work in the world today – because he does work, he is alive – I wonder whether we look for the wrong things.

And perhaps even look in the wrong place.

We expect a warm fuzzy feeling. That's what faith is about, we think.

When what today's reading tell us is we should be looking for birth pangs, convulsions, even agony. Fragile new life.

This week at the Cathedral we launched – fairly quietly, without great fanfare – our outreach to the homeless in our immediate vicinity.

Simply showing compassion and kindness to people on the streets.

An offer of a hot drink, checking that their housing needs are being attended to.

We are not looking to cast judgement on people, to fix anyone, or solve their problems overnight.

We are just trying to do what the Church does best.

And it's probably true to say that as Bristol Cathedral we've taken a little bit of time to get here.

We've struggled a bit with conflicting visions, voices of concern.

May be not agony and convulsions but birth pangs certainly!

And it is easy – certainly it's easy for me – to find this irritating, annoying, a distraction from what we really should be doing.

When in fact, my epiphany is to realise that may be the diversity of opinion, the voices of concern, aren't any of these things.

Rather, it is through them that we learn to be the body of Christ.

Surprise, surprise, the journey is as important as the destination.

And maybe, just maybe, what comes out in the wash – our homelessness work, for instance – what comes out in the end, is better for the fact that it is co-created, even created *ex nihilo* (created out of nothing)

More of God, on account of the birth pangs.

So, as you look out into the world, at your own life, the communities of which you are part – this community, particularly those places and situations which are fraught at the moment, which involve some element of struggle...

Ask yourself what might be being birthed?

May be not quite what you had imagined.

But which might just be of God, of the One who teaches with authority...

The one who shines light in the darkness.

And who puts our out of kilter world to rights.

Amen.