

January 28, 2024
The Fourth Sunday in Epiphany
Grace, Casanova; St. Luke's, Remington; St. Andrew's, Ada
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Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Psalm 111
1 Corinthians 8:1-13
Mark 1:21-28

Today's readings answer the question, Who gets to tell you what to do? Our readings are all about authority. The word itself is a little surprising; it comes from the Latin *auctor*, which means originator. Hence the word author, the first half of authority. Anyone who claims any kind of authority, then, has to have some kind of ties to the origin – the beginning – of the matter at hand. The reason why the crowds were so baffled by the authority of Jesus was because back in those days there was only one way of teaching God's Word: the rabbis, Scribes, and temple leaders never had original thoughts of their own; they simply quoted what great teachers had said before them. We still see traces of that today, when lawyers who want to win a case in court have to cite legal precedent: they have to tell the court how earlier courts decided a similar matter. Neither the lawyers, then, nor the ancient teachers had any true authority. They had no origin, just a good grasp of history. Jesus, on the other hand, cites no other teachers, invokes no past precedents, and quotes no one. He speaks from the origin of everything that is: He is the true originator, the only real *auctor*.

In our own society, authority seems to come in two flavors: intrinsic and extrinsic; inner authority and outer authority. Extrinsic authority is all around us; the power of certain people to do certain things. If the State Police clock you at 85 on the highway, they have the authority to shut you down. Intrinsic authority is a little trickier; the people who exercise that authority have a power within themselves to make other people do certain things. Today's Gospel has fantastic examples of both: Jesus uses external authority to cast out demons, and He uses His own internal authority to teach without invoking other teachers. The people had never seen such a thing before; they listened to Him.

We see the same thing with Paul. Almost all of his letters to the early churches include answers to questions the churches have asked him. They are seeking his external authority to settle disputes, like whether it's okay to eat meat that was once offered to idols. While exercising his extrinsic authority to answer the question, he displays a great deal of intrinsic authority when he says he will never do anything that causes anyone in the Church to stumble. People listened to him and did what they told them to do because he was, well, Paul, a man of great authority.

The speech Moses gives to the people is even more clear: the prophets who come after Moses will speak with God's authority; they will be connected to the *auctor*, the originator, in ways that false prophets can only dream about. And, says Moses, God help the prophets – or anyone else – who claims an authority that they just don't have.

And so it comes to us. We face all kinds of authority every day, most of it is extrinsic, but we all have people in our lives who exercise some kind of intrinsic authority over us as well. Our readings invite us to consider the legitimacy of that authority. Is it connected to the origin? With extrinsic authority, we have little choice but to obey. If we don't pay our taxes, the IRS freezes our bank account. If we don't show up for work we get fired. Our obedience to intrinsic authority, just like the concept itself, is a little trickier. What is about that person or those people that causes us to obey and trust them? This morning's readings offer us an invitation to consider all the people we trust in our lives – all the people in whom we recognize some intrinsic authority – and ask ourselves if by their words and lives they show themselves as people connected to, and speaking for, the *auctor*, the origin of the thing they're talking about. More important, they're asking us to determine if we're listening to the right people.