

Sunday 31st January
Epiphany 4 (Proper 4)
Deuteronomy 18: 15 – 20; Psalm 111; Mark 1: 21 – 28

A few years ago this picture was doing the rounds on social media



The caption to it said that this is a wolf pack, the front three wolves are the old/sick – they set the pace for the pack so that they are not left behind. Then come 5 strong ones, the front line, protection for the 3 at the front, the centre is the main pack, followed by the 5 strongest and finally at the back is the leader, the alpha male controlling everything from the rear where he can see all that is happening and react quickly to surprise attacks.

It's a lovely story isn't it? A good example of how communities should work together and protect each other – sadly it isn't true. The *picture* is real, it's taken from a 2011 BBC documentary called *Frozen Planet* and it shows a pack of timberwolves hunting bison in Northern Canada. The pack is led by the lead female who breaks the trail through the deep snow, the others follow in single file in her tracks to save energy for the hunt.

Advances in communication technology have made connecting with each other faster and easier but have also made it faster and easier to spread false information. That's why today's Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy is particularly relevant to us today.

Moses reminds the people that they themselves demanded that God would no longer show himself to them because they were afraid (Ex 20: 18 – 19; Deut 5: 22 – 26). God had made Moses his intermediary and now he was promising that there would be others like Moses to continue passing on God's words to his people. He warns them to listen to these prophets

Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. Deut 18 v 19

he also warns them to be careful

²¹ You may say to yourself, 'How can we recognize a word that the LORD has not spoken?' ²² If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it. Deut 18 v 21 + 22

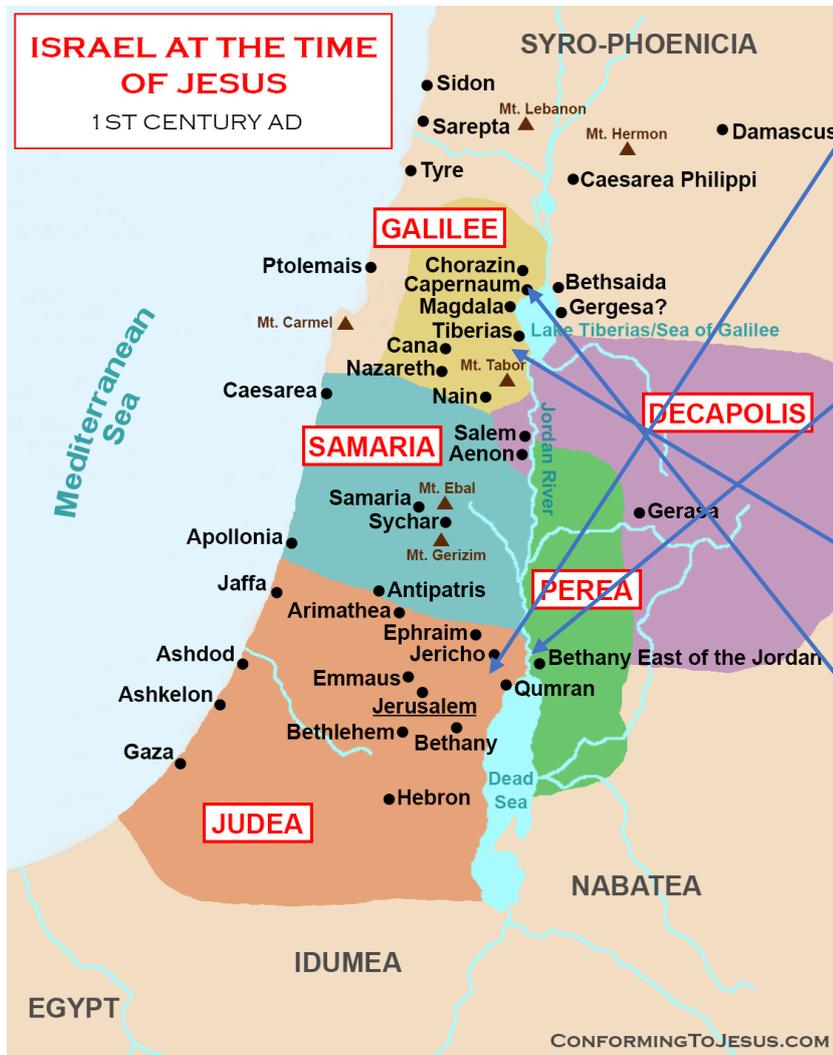
With the benefit of the historical books of the Bible we know that the people more often than not ignored what the prophets were telling them even though what they said came true. In fact, many of the prophets were reviled and treated extremely badly

It's sad isn't it – God walked in the garden with Adam + Eve until that relationship was broken, the relationship between God and humanity continued to deteriorate until we were no longer able to be in his presence. God's desire is to mend that broken relationship and he does it with the ultimate fulfilment of the promise made in verse 15 of today's reading

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.

He sends Jesus.

As a writer, Mark doesn't waste words, in the space of 20 verses we travel almost the length of Israel.



Chapter 1 begins with John the Baptist in the desert region of Judea preparing “the way for the Lord”. Jesus comes down from Galilee and is baptised by John in the River Jordan. He then spends forty days in the desert facing the temptations. After this, and because John has been imprisoned, Jesus returns to Galilee where he begins to call the disciples to follow him. All in 20 verses.

Now we’ve reached today’s reading and we find Jesus in Capernaum on the Sabbath. He goes

to the synagogue and speaks as ‘one having authority’ (Mk 1 v 22). This means he didn’t refer to words spoken by Moses or other well-known rabbis but spoke his own words, or more correctly, God’s words, as the prophets of old had done. Like the prophets before him, Jesus speaks out God’s words and he then backs up his words with actions, in this case he performs an exorcism on a man with an “unclean spirit”. It’s interesting that the only one to recognise who Jesus is really is the man with the unclean spirit

he cried out, ‘What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.’ Mk 1 v 24

At this point people have fallen out of the habit of recognising God’s words spoken through those he sends. Although he has a good following, like the prophets before him Jesus is reviled, treated badly and eventually killed – he even references this in the parable of the wicked tenants told in Mark 12 (also in Matthew 21 and Luke 20). Jesus, however, is triumphantly resurrected and has become the means by which our relationship with God can be restored.

It's very easy to be swept up by a charismatic leader saying what you want to hear, carried along with the crowd only to come crashing down when their rhetoric isn't fulfilled or they are shown to have feet of clay. It's much less easy to take a step back, think about what is being said and ask if it fits with what you already know. This was the warning that God was giving in our Deuteronomy reading, he also causes Jeremiah and Ezekiel to warn against false prophets. Matthew, Mark and Luke all record Jesus warning against false prophets.

When we're confused or unsure our best resource is the Bible, especially the words of Jesus because, again with the benefit of history, we know that the things he said would happen *did* happen. After he ascended back to heaven the promised Holy Spirit came which means that now we are again able to communicate directly with God. He may not physically walk with us "in the cool of the day" (Gen 3 v 8) but we can speak with him in prayer; we can be aware of his presence; we can be guided by the Holy Spirit. We have the means to check whether what we're hearing is in line with God's character and his will. Then it's up to us to choose which voice we listen to and will follow.