

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(1 Kings 3:5,7-12 / Matthew 13:44-52)
27.07.2014

I hear the Word of God addressed to us this Sunday as an invitation to ask for and be open to receive the wisdom and insight we need for our daily lives, just as Solomon did in today's first reading.

This wisdom, this insight, is given to us in a privileged way through prayerful, reflective reading of the Sacred Scriptures.

The end of today's gospel passages suggests this to me.

In his Rule for Monks St Benedict uses the image of a treasury (a storeroom filled with precious things) from which can be drawn forth things both new and old for the teaching of the community. For Benedict, this treasury (rich storeroom) is the Bible. It is to God's word that the abbot should look for the wisdom and insight he needs to give guidance and direction to the life of his brethren

Elsewhere in the Rule Benedict states clearly that the Rule of the Rule is the gospel.

He exhorts us to allow the gospel to give direction to our lives.

He speaks of the teaching of both Old and New Testaments as the surest guide for our life.

We must understand what Benedict is saying here. It is not that he is advocating (and nor would I) that any of us come to think of the Bible as a sort of encyclopedia or computer *search engine* which contains the one and only clear-cut answer to each and every question wont to arise in our hearts today.

We cannot expect to find in the Bible a direct, ready-made, clear-cut answer to all the many questions we pose.

Let me explain myself.

What I am saying is this: the Scriptures contain wisdom, they give direction, but they are not an answer book.

They give direction, but they do not indicate a *one way* road to follow.

They instruct us, certainly. They tell us the way we should be going. But they do not work out for us, down to the finest detail, the itinerary to be followed.

My point is this: we must read the Scriptures intelligently.

We must approach the Bible with discerning minds and open hearts, having asked the Lord for His gift of wisdom.

It is as we adopt this approach that we learn to hear God speak to us through the inspired words of the sacred text.

We are thus able to bring God's word to bear upon our lives.

We come to understand what the Scriptures' message has to say about the concrete realities of our existence.

It is not that God speaks to us with an audible voice.

It is not that He tells us to turn right here and left there, as a programmed *sat-nav* would direct us on our journey.

But, as we train ourselves to listen to the Lord who speaks to us in a privileged way through the

Bible (note I said *privileged way through the Bible*, not an exclusive way through the Bible, for God has other means of speaking to us than the Sacred Scriptures) we come to feel in our hearts the motions of God's Spirit at work.

It happens for us as it happened for the Emmaus pilgrims who recognised their hearts had been moved; it seems to us as if our hearts burn within us.

That does not mean that we will always like what we hear.

While there are times when the burning we will feel will be akin to a warm and comforting glow, there are other times when it will be more like the heat of a purifying fire that scorches us.

There are times when the Scriptures' message will challenge us greatly.

There are times when it will really disturb us.

I think we must also accept that while there are times when it will seem to us as if the words leap from the page and speak into our life situation, there will be other times when it will be a much more arduous task as we take up the book and read. The words we read will seem like dead letters. They will not speak to us readily.

There are times when it will appear to us as if God's message is hidden from us. The words may seem to be meaningless, far removed from where we are.

Perhaps this can be explained by the fact that often we are far from where we should be!

At other moments the words we read will be received by us as words of correction; we may even receive them as severe words of reprimand.

Through the reading of the Scriptures, we may hear the Lord flag up for us things in our lives that we are called to let go of, even though everything within us would make us want to cling on to these very things.

There are times when God's word will call upon us to change behaviours that we would prefer to leave unchanged.

It is as we train ourselves to listen to the Lord during times of *lectio divina* and at the Sacred liturgy, where God's word is proclaimed sacramentally, that we come to hear the Lord speak to us in all sorts of places and in many different ways, over and beyond those moments when we actually sit with the Word.

For example, it happens that we come to hear an echo of God's word in a conversation with someone: a word they pronounce, or the way they express things, somehow resonates with a Scriptural word encountered earlier in *lectio divina* or at the liturgy. We hear God speak to us through what was maybe just a throw-away remark on behalf the other.

How can I put all this?

Perhaps the best way of expressing what I want to say this morning is this: ***By our reading of the Bible, we enter into the world of Scripture so that the Word of God may break into our world and into our lives.***

Another way of putting that would be to echo this line from the writings of the late pope, John-Paul II (now St John-Paul). This is a word I have often quoted from this pulpit: ***From familiarity with God's word we draw the light needed for that individual and communal discernment which helps us seek the ways of the Lord in the signs of our own times. We begin to acquire a kind of supernatural intuition.***

Another way of expressing that would be to say that we are given the wisdom, the God-insight, for which Solomon prayed.

While God wishes to speak to us on a daily basis, I think it fair to say that we can expect His voice to come through most distinctly at the important moments in the unfolding of our story: the turning points, the critical junctures of our lives.

Even though we can expect this, it is probably true to say that frequently God's interventions and His words spoken to us are inclined to take us by surprise.

The monastic tradition is full of stories of God's surprising, unexpected, interventions which change people's lives altogether.

Just think of the call of Anthony the Great, who, when he heard the gospel proclaimed in church, understood its message to be a word spoken to him directly: *Go sell all you have. Give the money to the poor. And come follow me.*

Scripture played a critical role in the lives of many of the saints.

Many of the founders of Religious Institutes were guided by a Scriptural word.

Think for example, of the word of the psalm which speaks of *fullness of redemption* and you grasp the Redemptorist charism, or the Apostle Paul's word *we preach Christ crucified* and you better understand the Passionists' mission.

Our own community heard and hears its call in terms of building *a house of prayer for all God's people, a house of prayer for all peoples* in this place. We seek to live with unfailing intensity the prayer of Jesus contained in John 17 pleading for the unity of the Church. We feel called to give our lives with Christ for the gathering together of all God's scattered children, for the intention *that all may be one.*

Scripture played a critical role in the conversion of the great St Augustine. He speaks of this beautifully. Let us listen to his story in this respect.

One day when he was wrestling with the Lord in prayer, wondering about what direction his life should take, he heard a child's voice singing; *Take the book and read it. Take it and read it.*

Augustine recounts what happened in his Confessions:

I checked the force of my tears and rose to my feet, being quite certain that I must interpret this as a divine command to me to open the Bible and read the first passage which I should come upon. For I had heard about St Anthony: he had happened to come in when the gospel was being read, as though the words read were spoken directly to himself he had received the admonition: 'Go, sell all that you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come follow me'. And by such a message he had been immediately converted.

I snatched up the Bible, opened it, and read in silence the passage upon which my eyes first fell: 'Not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires'. I had no wish to read further; there was no need to. For immediately I had reached the end of this sentence it was as though my heart was filled with a light of confidence and all the shadows of doubt were swept away.

What a remarkable story of how wisdom and strength, insight and conversion, were operated in the life of someone through contact with God's word. Through the words he read in Scripture a sense of direction was given to Augustine's life.

God's word will always be recognisable.

How?

It will produce peace (even as it challenges us).

It will murmur love into our hearts and in so doing it will leave us free to respond or not to respond. The hallmark of love is freedom. God offers an invitation to us through His word, He does not coerce us. He beckons us to follow the way He indicates to us, He does not force us into anything.

While it seems right today to emphasise the importance of reading the Bible to draw froth from it the insight and wisdom we need for our daily lives, it seems equally important to remember that, in our Catholic understanding, *the Word* is not just the written words of the book of the Bible: ***the Word is the person of Christ!***

Writing to all Christians at the beginning of the new millennium, in *Novo Millenio Ineunte*, St John-Paul articulated things beautifully when he wrote: ***You must not tire of meditating on Holy Scripture and above all on the Gospels so that they can imprint upon you the features of the Incarnate Word.***

Here is the proof that we are getting the Scriptures properly, truly understanding God's Word, being filled with true wisdom and authentic insight: the features of the Incarnate Word are imprinted upon us!

In other words, we resemble Jesus.

When people look to us and scrutinise our lives, they discern Christ to be alive within us.

The Post-Synodal Address on the Word of God, *Verbum Domini*, published by Pope Emeritus Benedict, ended by formulating the wish that *every day of our lives be shaped by a renewed encounter with Christ, the Word of the Father made flesh.*

What taking up the Bible and reading its message should do is to make us encounter Christ, and, in our turn, reflect Jesus to others.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us: *in the Scriptures it is Jesus, the incarnate word, who comes to meet us, for all Scripture speaks to us of Christ.*

And for the Catechism to insist upon the Scriptures' relevance for us today, for their message is always new.

All that to say that from the treasury of God's ancient word we can draw forth new things: a word for today, a word for each and every day of our lives, if only we have faith.

I leave the last word of this reflection to the Apostle Paul who wrote this line to the Thessalonians, which I receive for myself and which I offer to you as a word of comfort and confirmation for us as we strive to be believers today: ***The Word of God is still at work ... The Word of God is still at work in you who believe.***

As disciples of Christ it befalls all of us to draw forth from the treasury of God's word things both old and new in order to share the insights contained therein with the people of our own day and age so that the Christian message may also be transmitted to future generations.

The message of the Bible is at the very heart of the rich heritage we have received and which we are called to transmit.

Amen!