

4th Sunday in the Ordinary Time (B)
(Deuteronomy 18:15-20 / Mark 1:21-28)
01.02.2015

As God's People we are given the assurance that we will never be devoid of His word. Our God who speaks into the hearts of His People will always raise up from among us prophetic voices: men and women who have for mission to bear His own life-giving word, men and women who when they speak, preach and teach will be shown to share in the authority of Christ Himself.

The assurance that God's People will never be devoid of His life-giving word does not, however, carry with it the guarantee that those who speak in the Lord's name will always be listened to.

Indeed, all too often the prophetic voices that are raised among God's people, the bearers of God's word who are sent to speak His message of life, are met with resistance.

The history of God's People shows us that prophets are more likely to be shunned and ignored than welcomed and heeded.

All too often when prophets were raised up by God in the midst of His People - including the Great Prophet, Christ - they were despised and rejected, persecuted and even put to death.

It seems inevitable that great efforts will be made to silence prophetic voices when their words (which do nothing other than echo God's own word) make their listeners feel uncomfortable.

This was the case in biblical times and it has continued to be the case throughout the history of the Church right down to our own day.

I think it fair to say that a certain degree of suffering has always been part of any true prophet's experience.

Little wonder that many prophets have resisted their vocation at first and only later, rather reluctantly, responded to the call God addressed to them to speak the words the Lord gave them to relay to the people.

We might ask: what is that gives to a person's words a prophetic character and prophetic value?

Well, one of the first criterion in regard to the prophetic character and value of the word they speak will be whether or not their word gives life.

You see, God's word is always a life-giving message.

Speaking of Jesus, today's gospel text reads: *They were astounded at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.*

We are told towards the end of the text that this is what the people said when they heard Him speak: *What is this? A new teaching - with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him.*

Authority is the key word in the text.

That word *authority* - with its Latin root *auctor* - carries within it the notion of *authorship* and *growth*.

A prophetic word will always be infused with authority in the sense I have just given to that word.

Given this, one would think everybody would want to welcome the prophetic words addressed to them, but I am afraid it is not just as simple as that.

Why is this so?

Well, in the hearts of many men and women - and, let's admit it, in our own hearts too - there can be a mysterious resistance to growth.

Ever since the Fall of our first parents, there is in all our hearts a tendency to sin, a subtle resistance to true life and even a certain connivance with death.

St Gregory of Nyssa explains that *sin is ultimately a refusal to grow*.

We are inclined to shy away from and/or resist growth.

We can prefer to live in immaturity than accept to grow up.

This refusal on behalf of God's People to mature - this refusal to grow up - can lead some to make efforts to drown out every prophetic voice that might challenge them from taking refuge and staying stuck in childish ways.

The whole control thing that can be so prevalent in Church life is most often a manifestation of that well-known childish phenomenon which has people want to be at the centre of everything.

The childish illusion (for it is just an illusion) of all-powerfulness can snare those called to exercise authority in the Church.

Feeling their authority challenged by the slightest questioning some can lead some to resort to a defensiveness bordering on the obsessive, others can deviate even further and start demonising anyone who might say anything that could be in any way interpreted as calling them to accountability.

They will sometimes respond to the challenging words addressed to them by perverting or distorting these words.

I was struck the other day when wanting to check out a quotation from a homily pronounced by Pope Francis on the 2nd February 2014 to come across a number of websites which are presenting themselves as authentically Catholic, but which are nothing less than perverse.

I discovered one website which has listed what it calls *Pope Francis' insults to God's People*. Words spoken by Pope Francis (often taken out of context) are recorded on this site and presented as insults to the Church. What one finds listed as insults are images and figurative language which have employed by the Pope to transmit the gospel message. The images used are the sort Jesus might have used to challenge His listeners.

It is clear that those who quasi-demonise Pope Francis on this site are people who are refusing to face up to the challenge the Bishop of Rome has constantly addressed to all of us: the challenge to grow to our full stature in Christ.

What they read and present as insults are in fact words rooted in the teaching of Jesus as found in the Sacred Scriptures: words which could, in fact, be taken as words of encouragement, for they basically relay this message: *become more Christ-like*.

The obsessions of those who resist fundamental gospel teaching is frequently brought back to non-essential matters such as how one should dress up and prance about in order to be what these self-appointed guardians of the tradition (small 't') esteem to be *truly Catholic*.

What strikes me as we listen to the gospel passage we are given to meditate this morning is what is going on in the story.

I believe that what we see going on in some quarters of the Church today is the very same thing that we see going on in the gospel story we are called to consider this morning.

I am thinking of those who are - imagine themselves to be - *more Catholic than the pope*, as we say in popular speech.

What we see going on in today's gospel story and in the some quarters of the Church today is what has always gone on among those afraid of change: a resistance to the eternal newness of the Gospel God the grace of His Good Spirit at work.

The newness of the gospel and the goodness of grace is something the bad spirit, the *diabolos*, seeks to undermine and pervert.

It is Satan's way to introduce negativity and cause dissensions.

It is the way of the *diabolos* to sow seeds of division, to cast doubts upon and make assertions against God's true servants.

Remember how Christ Himself was deemed to carry out His good work in the power of Beelzebul, *the Prince of devils*. This was an accusation levelled against Jesus by the religious authorities of His day, the strict observers of the Law.

In the end these people said: *We have a Law and according to this Law He must die.*

The very God who gave the Law to His people and who was made incarnate in Christ-Jesus was put to death by those who pretended to observe the Law!

In fact, these supposed and self-appointed guardians of authentic Judaism were simply a group caught up in their own importance, people anxious to safeguard their own interests, leaders wanting to hold control over the people.

They were self-referential and self-obsessed.

What mattered to them were the little traditions they clung to, because these little traditions bolstered their importance.

And all the while they ignored the very essence of the Law: love!

Love and mercy - the essence of the Law - were not their concerns at all.

Power and control were what mattered to them most.

I cannot help but think of something I heard recently, words reported to me as spoken by a high-ranking ecclesiastic. This member of the episcopate of the Catholic Church, speaking of the first meeting of the Synod on the Family which he attended, a gathering presided over by Pope Francis, dared to say: *The pope was there, but Peter was absent.*

I cry *scandal!*

It is absolutely scandalous that any Catholic bishop should say such a thing.

Any true Catholic listening to such a remark cannot but cry out *scandal!*

No one who has for mission to safeguard the unity of the Church (for such is the mission of every bishop) should ever dare to make such a foolish and pernicious throw-away remark. This is nothing less than an offence against the unity of God's People by one who, no doubt, imagines himself to be a defender of what he calls true Catholicism.

This bishop's argument for making his foolish remark is that the Church should teach. *Peter should speak*, he said.

Of course, I agree with that.

But Peter must also listen.

Paul pointed this out to Peter already in the Acts of the Apostles.

There is no doubt that Peter's successor has for mission to speak the word of truth, but he also needs to listen to what the Spirit is saying in the Church before he speaks the words God gives him to echo in response to the reality of people's lives.

Pope Francis has been clear all along. He wants to listen, just as Jesus did.

How often, as we read our way through the gospels, we witness Jesus listening to people's experience. Again and again, we see how Jesus asks people to explain themselves to Him, to share their experience with Him, and, only once they have done this, does He then go on to speak God's word to them.

We must remember that while God's word which is always a life-giving message, very often, it is also a challenging one.

What Mark's gospel draws to our attention this morning is something we see played out over and over again in the unfolding of the gospel story and in the life of the Church: the confrontation between God's Good Spirit which is life-giving and builds people up and the bad spirit which because it originates with the *diabolos*, Satan, seeks to destroy and ultimately leads to death.

In Mark's gospel the whole of Jesus' ministry will be marked by the struggle between good and evil, between life and death.

At the heart of Mark's gospel we will also find the key question of Jesus' identity.

The identity issue remains a key issue for all of us in the Church today.

So many of the ills and divisions we encounter in the contemporary Church can be traced back to the key issue of identity.

This matter was already touched on in a homily preached here two weeks ago. I won't go back over all that was said by another brother then.

Let me just emphasise once again this morning that, at the end of the day, the only identity that really matters is our identity in Christ.

When we identify with anything or anyone other than Christ we are in error.

It was already a problem in New Testament times that some people identified themselves with one or other of God's servants rather than with Christ. There were those who were for Paul, those who were for Cephas, those who were for Apollos.

The true Christian is never for any one other than for Christ!

The authenticity of the prophetic voices raised up in the Church will always be discerned according to this criterion: the words they speak will not be just their own, but rather an echo of God's word. They will speak the words of Christ Himself or words in consonance with Jesus' essential message. Their words, even when they are strong and challenging, will be imbued with love and truth. They will be words which are life-giving and which make for unity and peace. This may mean that they denounce what is a cause of death and what is going against communion and the establishment of what St Benedict calls realistically in his Rule for Monks, *a false peace*.

God's prophetic word will often come to us from more than one quarter and sometimes we will find ourselves surprised by the degree of harmony between people we might not at first have seen as actually being in full accord or singing from the same hymn sheet.

It is vital for us in the Church today to be vigilant in regard to some of the remarks we can hear such as so and so is a *Francis man or woman*, while so and so else is a *Benedict man or woman*.

We must be all the more careful when it comes to assessing those who exercise ministries of communion in the Church - and/or them identifying themselves as aligned with one or the other, Benedict or Francis.

Let me end by sharing with you prophetic words which could easily have come from the mouth of Pope Francis.

Reflecting on the way things would and indeed should develop for the Church a Bavarian theologian who was calling for radical reform nearly fifty years ago had this to say when he spoke by radio on Christmas Day 1969: *What will emerge is a restructured Church, with little influence over political decisions: a Church that is socially irrelevant, left humiliated and forced to start over.* He went on to say: *The Church will become small and will have to start pretty much all over again. It will no longer have the structure it built in its years of prosperity. The reduction in numbers of faithful will lead to it losing an important part of social privileges. It will be a more spiritual Church and will not claim a political mandate, flirting with the Right one moment and the Left the next. It will be poor and will become the Church of the destitute. Then and only then will people see that small community of faithful as something completely new. People will see the Church as a source of hope for themselves, the source of hope that they had always been searching for.*

The Bavarian theologian who spoke in this prophetic vein was none other than the man we now call Pope Emeritus Benedict.

These words of Pope Emeritus Benedict about smallness and poverty and the need for restructuring and a fresh start all resonate with things Pope Francis, who is now Bishop of Rome, has been saying.

Who would dare to suggest anything other than that the words of both these men, servants of God, *servants of the servants of God*, are rooted in the vision and message of the Divine Master who made Himself *the humble servant of all*: Christ-Jesus our Lord?!

Amen!