

5th Sunday in the Ordinary Time (B)
(1Corinthians 9:16-19.22-23 / Mark 1:29-39)
08.02.2015
Preaching

Today in our two readings, we find Jesus and St Paul both concerned about the primary aspect of their mission: preaching the Good News.

After his visit to the synagogue of Capernaum, Jesus exercises his healing ministry and then he declares to his disciples: "Let us go elsewhere (...) so that I can preach there too, because that is why I came".

St Paul, expresses the same sense of duty when he declares: "I should be punished if I did not preach".

By virtue of the sacrament of baptism, the proclamation of the Gospel is the responsibility of the entire Christian community. St John Paul II declared in his first homily as Pope: "The mission of Christ – Priest, Prophet-Teacher, King – continues in the Church. Everyone, the whole people of God shares in his threefold mission" (22.10.1978).

While there are different vocations and ministries in the Church, there is no doubt that we all have "to take an active, conscientious and responsible part in the mission of the Church" (St John Paul II, *Christifideles...*, n. 3), in the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

So it must be clear that preaching is not the monopoly of the priests and not securely confined to the pulpit at Sunday liturgies. All of us and all the time are supposed to be heralds of the Gospel.

For both Jesus and St Paul, the ministry of preaching encompasses all their activities. Their whole lives are a living proclamation of the Good News. For Jesus, it includes the healing of Peter's mother-in-law and of all those who come to him; for his part, St Paul explains how, "for the sake of the Gospel", he aims to make of his life a means "so as to win as many as he could".

This first point seems to me particularly important. The preaching of the Good News is not only about words but primarily about life, how we live, the decisions we make and the priorities we give to things in our lives. The way we speak, worship, relate to others, relax and vote can bear witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ – or fail to do so. Preaching on Sundays is part of a whole process wherein priests and lay people listen together to the Word of God so that their lives may be transformed and become seeds of transformation in the world.

Many times until now I used the expression *Good News* to describe the content of the preaching. While in English there are two words: *preaching the Gospel*, implying that we could preach something else; for St Paul there is only one verb which describes the action and its content. The conclusion we draw from this is that for St Paul, in the verses we heard today, it is impossible to preach something which is not the Good News. For Paul, to preach is to proclaim the Good News.

The question for us is that if we do not proclaim the Good News, what are we proclaiming? What do we say with our words and deeds? What do we sow in the hearts of our contemporaries?

We could quote the very strong words of Rabbi Abraham Heschel to illustrate the dilemma in which we find ourselves. He wrote: “The world cannot remain a vacuum. Unless we make it an altar to God, it is invaded by demons. This is no time for neutrality. (...) We (...) are either ministers of the sacred or slaves of evil” (*No time... in Moral...*, p. 75).

Indeed there is no time for neutrality. We cannot withdraw from our responsibility. When people listen to us, see us living, what do they see? What do they conclude?

As he was preaching to his brothers, St Bernard declared: “My purpose is not so much to explain words as to move hearts” (*Serm. On the Song...*, 16:1).

When we do not hide our Christian identity or just forget it every week between Mass on one Sunday and that the following week, we may be tempted to preach at others with words and deeds in order to justify our attitudes, or to impose on others our point of view, or to coerce people to act as we think they should, or again to make them comply with the dominant opinion, or even just to prove them wrong and – obviously and more importantly – to prove ourselves right.

We must remember that what we are called to preach is Good News. It is good because it has the power to move hearts.

When St Bernard speaks of the heart, he does not mean only the seat of emotions and feelings; for him the heart is the centre of will and decision. So the preaching of the Good News has the power and the mission to orientate, inspire and shape our whole lives. This is what God means when he says in the prophet Isaiah: “As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth (...) so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the things for which I sent it” (55:10-11).

Clearly we do not have to wait for our lives to be completely evangelised in order to preach the Good News. Let us remember that God is at his best working with earthenware jars! There is no need for us to use the old excuse of false humility, or of our poverty and weakness... most of the time this is just a way for us to mask our laziness and complacency. God does not expect us to be strong, invincible, perfect, and efficient, he just wants us to be available and ready to accomplish his will.

Wherever we are, as we are, it is enough for us to say, like all the servants of the Lord: “Here I am (...), I proclaimed the saving justice of the Lord in the great assembly. See I will not hold my tongue” (Ps 40:6.9 NJB).

May all of us be renewed, inspired and strengthened in our daily proclamation of the Good News so that the world, our families and communities may reflect God’s holiness and goodness.