

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Isaiah 8:23-9:3 / Matthew 4:12-23)
26.01.2020
The Sunday of the Word of God

In his commentary on Pope Francis' Apostolic Letter *Aperuit Illis* (AI), which institutes the 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time as the Sunday of the Word of God, Archbishop Rino Fisichella expresses the opinion that "it makes sense to link this *Sunday of the Word of God* with the feast of *Corpus Christi* in which the Body and Blood of Christ are solemnly celebrated" (AI, p. 32).

The parallel between the two celebrations – that of the Sacrament of the Eucharist and that of the sacred Scriptures – is very enlightening. Both the Eucharist and the Scriptures are the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit the bread and wine cannot be received as the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ, in the same way the words printed on paper cannot be read or heard as the Word of God.

In the context in which we find ourselves we should remember that the Word of God, heard, proclaimed and meditated upon in the course of our celebrations has a sacramental dimension and impact. We believe what is written in the Letter to the Hebrews: "indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12). Pope Francis reminds us that the Word is "performative" (AI, n. 2). Performative words do not describe an event or make a statement, but rather they do something, they perform an act, they effect change.

In the same way as the Sacrament of the Eucharist does not impact on us unless we open ourselves to it, so the Word of God in the sacred Scriptures does not speak a word of life to us unless we open our ears in faith and allow it to convert, challenge and encourage us. As Pope Francis writes: "Christ Jesus is knocking at our door in the words of sacred Scriptures. If we hear his voice and open the door of our minds and hearts, then he will enter our lives and remain ever with us" (AI, n. 8).

In asking us, on this particular Sunday, to celebrate, study and disseminate the Word of God (AI, n. 3), Pope Francis wants to foster a "true dialogue with the word of God" (AI, n. 5) because the sacred Scriptures are the privileged place of a "constant dialogue between the Lord and his people" (AI, n. 2).

The biblical revelation of God underlines for us over and over again that God speaks to his people. The Bible is punctuated by the expression: "God says...". The Bible is the audible intervention and revelation of God in the world. While idols are dumb, God speaks.

God does not throw his word into an empty space. God's word is destined to somebody, it is a word made for a covenant. It wants to open up a dialogue with each one of us. God's word in the sacred Scriptures is an act of his self-giving love that becomes presence in dialogue, a reaching out to us, in view to a meeting with us.

God consented to the intellectual and cultural limitations of the writers of the sacred Scriptures and to the poverty of our human words in order to speak to us. His Word comes to us now through words written more than 2000 years ago. Clearly there is need for us to get accustomed to God's voice, his accent, his mindset in order to understand him. In our approach of the Bible we have to persevere in love, and like a lover we have to be attentive so as to be able to recognise the voice of our Beloved among the many other voices which surround us.

Today in our Gospel reading, Peter and Andrew, James and John obeyed Jesus' words at once because, in Jesus' words, they recognised a voice they had longed to hear for a long time, a voice which called them to experience new life.

Obviously God does not speak to us only through the sacred Scriptures for, as the poet says, "Christ plays in ten thousand places" (G. M. Hopkins, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*). Yet the Church believes that in the Bible, we find a unique and privileged testimony to Christ and we find our identity as Christians (*AI*, n. 1).

"The Scriptures everywhere speak of Christ" (*AI*, n. 7), not just as a journalistic report. These texts give us our identity and help us to remain grounded in our history as the people of God. They do not speak of Christ as a man who lived 2000 years ago but as the Lord who speaks to us today as he has done across the ages.

Pope Francis' initiative is not a public relations coup. At the core of our Christian faith is the belief expressed so powerfully by St Jerome, in the 4th century, that "ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ" (quoted in *AI*, n. 1).

If we want to experience the spiritual renewal of our Christian communities, if we want to dialogue with the world and our society in a truly Christian way, then we need to go back to the Word of God. We need to receive, read, study, and meditate upon the sacred Scriptures, daring to believe that what we have here is a word of life.

Today, maybe more than ever because we are bombarded non-stop by empty and aggressive words, we all long for true and meaningful words. We await words that are real. Words have become so cheap and meaningless that we feel the need to add emoji to our messages... and the more emoji the better.

The point is not for all of us to get Scripture degrees or to read the Bible in Hebrew or Greek. For us Christians the challenge is to be really thirsty for Christ, to long for him so that we may hear his voice in the sacred Scriptures and be strengthened by words which are meaningful and thus able to give meaning to our lives.

But that is not all, we must bear witness to the life-giving power of the Word of God in the Church and lead our brothers and sisters in humanity to the fountain of the Word of God (cf. St Ephrem quoted in *AI*, n. 2). In our Christian communities, in the meditation and the study of the sacred Scriptures, we have an inexhaustible fountain which is there for those who are thirsty and need to be refreshed for the journey which lies ahead.

Part of the problem may be that we are not ready to listen to God, too busy to pay attention to his Word, too self-satisfied to believe that we need to make the effort to encounter him in the sacred Scriptures.

St John Chrysostom reminds us that "the Scriptures are a door that leads us to God" (Homily 59 on John). In the Church, let us help one another to knock at the door of the Scriptures with perseverance and clear purpose so that we may become mature in faith. Taking the time to read and meditate upon the Scriptures, as persons and as communities, "by the grace of God, as we grow even more in light, so shall we increase ever more in love" (Cassiodorus, quoted in Masini, p 17).