

Homily – January 26th, 2025 – 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time



Six years ago, in 2019, Pope Francis established this Sunday, the third Sunday in Ordinary Time, as “Word of God Sunday.” By doing so, he invites us to devote more time in our lives to the celebration, the study and the spreading of the Word of God. He feels that the Word of God is a word

of hope. I agree. If Jesus is the Word of God made flesh, then naturally he is also a word of hope for our world.

When I look at the unfolding of world events, in our time, it’s not difficult to lose hope; in fact, it’s quite easy. Depression, suicidal thoughts, loneliness, feeling life is meaningless, or feeling disconnected from family and friends (even in a world that has mastered electronic social media), are all symptoms of people living without hope. I am no sociologist, but I even think crimes and violence somehow have roots in people who have lost hope and are looking for it in all the wrong places.

In the middle of it all, like an anchor, we cling to God’s Word.

If God’s Word is to give us hope, it can’t just be a word about what God did for those people in the past. It has to be about what God is doing for you, me, and the entire world here and now.

So many times we hear in Scripture, “Today is the day of salvation.” God isn’t all that interested in the nostalgic past, the “Good Ol’ Days.” God is really interested in the present. It seems in God there is no past or future only the eternal present. We get caught up in hurts of the past and keep playing the record over and over. This preoccupation with our past sins, faults, and flaws prevent us from bearing fruit in the present. The point of life is to bear fruit here and now. The preoccupation with the future causes us to live with a tremendous amount of anxiety. We live in the world of worst-case scenarios where we keep saying, “What if I lose my job?” or “what if I can’t pay the bills?” or “what if I become a widow or widower?” This preoccupation with the future also prevents us from bearing good fruit here and now.

That first reading from Nehemiah was long, swampy, and needs some explaining. Basically, it’s a story about the power of God’s word in the present. The Jewish people were returning to Jerusalem after being in exile for close to 70 years. When they returned to Jerusalem, there wasn’t much to return to. The city was destroyed, the Temple was reduced to rubble, and the people—because there were not allowed to practice their Jewish faith while in exile—had not heard God’s Word for 70 years. Nehemiah was appointed as governor and his job was to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and their beloved Temple. Ezra, on the other hand, being a priest, was tasked with an even more daunting job—rebuilding peoples’ faith.

Since they had no Temple to speak of, they built a wooden platform outside. From the platform, Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people and began

reading to them the Word of God. This was a powerful moment. Remember, the life expectancy in Biblical time was about 40. Because people had been in exile for close to 70 years, this meant that no one heard God's Word for 70 years. The people hearing it that day, were hearing it for the first time, as their parents were forbidding to practice their faith while in exile in Babylon. The grandparents, who were long dead, were the last generation to hear God's Word, yet it was the grandchildren who responded with "Amen, Amen" and lifting up their hands and bowing their heads in worship as Ezra read God's Word to them. It had an immediate and positive impact. It was the living Word of God giving life to those people as they were hearing it.

They felt guilty for all the ways they had turned their backs on God, for they knew that their disobedience to God got them in trouble in the first place. Ezra, the priest, responded to their guilt by saying, "Let go of the past. God has. Do not grieve for this day is holy to our Lord. Go forth holding your head up high. Your salvation is here. The Lord rejoices in you and is your strength."

We are supposed to believe that, too. The Church teaches us that when the Word of God is proclaimed at Mass, whether by a lay lector or the priest, that it really is the Word of God. It's no one less than God speaking to us in that moment. I wonder how many of us, including us priests, take that for granted and, thus, lose the power of what is going on in the very moment the Word is proclaimed. That's why we discourage people from doing their personal reading while the Word of God is proclaimed. If I was to say, "Guess what, God, the Divine, the Almighty,

whose word alone created the entire universe is about to speak”, our first response should not be, “Great, what page do I turn to?”

Jesus deliberately went looking for a particular piece of Scripture when he read in the synagogue 2,000 years ago. He quoted the prophet Isaiah, from 700 years prior. Isaiah wrote, and Jesus spoke, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” It’s present language. It doesn’t say, “Some day in the future, if I’m really good and have won God over, God might give me a little bit of Spirit.” “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor (right here and now), to set prisoners free (right here and now), to restore sight to the blind (right here and now), and to let the oppressed go free (right here and now).” Then Jesus rolled up the scroll, the living Word of God, and said, “You’ve just heard Scripture make history. It came true just now in this place” (Lk. 4:21).

I still have a t-shirt from the year 2000 when the Church worldwide was celebrating a Jubilee year. On the back of the shirt is a quote from the Book of Hebrews that says, “Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8). If that’s true—and I believe it is—then it tells us that Jesus spoke and related to Peter, John, Mary Magdalene, all the holy men and women of history in the same way he relates and speaks to us. Can we believe it?

Jesus, the one who conquered death has promised to be with us today, while we are still tied to all that is limited, frail, incomplete and wounded in this world. If we can’t believe in that, then we will be relegated to living in the past, to a god who

spoke to those people but doesn't speak words of hope now to us. Or, we live thinking we can't possibly be happy until tomorrow when things will change.

Luke's Gospel is full of now moments. In one of Luke's stories Jesus says to Zacchaeus, "*Today*, salvation has come to this house." Later, at the crucifixion, Jesus says to one of the thieves crucified next to him, "*Today*, you will be with me in paradise." In the last chapter in Luke, the once despondent but now happy disciples on the road to Emmaus say to each other, "Were not our hearts burning when he spoke to us on the road and explained God's Word to us?"

The first role of Scripture, of God's Word, in our lives is not to inform us, instruct us, or even inspire us, as good as that might be. The first thing Scripture wants to do in us is to make Christ present. It's to get our hearts burning. Without opening to God's presence in the Word, we won't be able to recognize his presence in the breaking of the bread.

If you get a chance to watch a YouTube video of someone hearing for the first time, usually because of cochlear implant, it's so moving. Their joy brings me to tears. That's the power of the spoken word...human words. That's what God's Word is also meant to do...to bring us to tears of joy.

~Fr. Phil