

Pro-Cathedral / Donnybrook

Sunday of the Word of God

23 January 2022

Welcome

All good things come in threes is an old saying. Today, we are marking three significant moments: we begin to read this year's Gospel from the start; we celebrate the Sunday of the Word of God and we find ourselves in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The three-fold coincidence is not an accident, of course. Pope Francis declared this new feast only 3 years ago and he chose this Sunday as the day – a well-chosen day of multiple resonance.

Topic

A Sunday devoted to the Word of God does give rise to a question: why do we bother to read such ancient texts, Sunday after Sunday? What's the use of it? How we/I benefit from it?

Steps

Perhaps you would not mind some personal history. When training to become a priest, I did a PG degree in theology. Already at that stage – 1978 – it was clear to me that to stay in ministry and in teaching, I could not go forward without a better grasp of Scripture. My first appointment was teaching in one of our Augustinian secondary schools. At the same time, invitations came to give retreats. Again, I decided very early on to base the retreats on the Scriptures – thinking it would be of more lasting value for the participants than anything I might dream up myself. Then, in 1983, I went to the Holy Land for the first time – and I was bowled over really. Suddenly the Gospels and the Old Testament came alive in a new way, so much so, that without knowing any Hebrew I bought a Hebrew Bible and promised myself I would learn the language. Eventually, my Order sent me off to do biblical studies – a real grace for me. There was one more step: in the 1990s, I discovered *lectio divina*, a way of reading scripture, a way of listening to the word so that it would be truly a word of life. In my experience, the Scriptures are an inexhaustible spring, always fascinating, always new. I look back on all these opportunities, these graces with immense gratitude – I couldn't tell you how much joy this "career" has brought me.

From these various experiences and my long engagement, I have come to realise a number of things which may be of help. I'll confine myself to three, of course!

(1) Pope Benedict once described the Scriptures in a poetic and helpful way: *the Scriptures are the very voice of the pilgrim people of God*. The Church of Ireland, on its website, has an almost identical expression: *The Bible tells of God's relationship with God's people through the centuries*. In the past, people like ourselves struggled, believed, suffered, hoped – and through the record of their experiences, of their relationship with God, God speaks to us today. We may note, we do this because we too are part of the pilgrim people of God and we do it together.

(2) To my mind, the Scriptures are a kind of sacrament, a place of encounter. When we read the Scriptures, God speaks to us, the Holy Spirit comes to our help and Jesus is with us. We can do such reading and listening on our own, of course, and that is good. But best of all, we do it with others. This is especially true of praying scripture: *lectio*

divina, to give it a formal title, is best done with others. God's word to us is refracted not only through the prism of ancient Israel or the first Christians, but through the experience of our contemporaries as well. Together, we enrich our reading and our listening. Reading Scripture with others is an immense resource, full of surprising insight, very enriching. It is not just a matter of prayer but also a very natural way of growing in faith and a way of coming to understand my faith today as an grown-up. As we read and pray, it is our hope that the words of Jesus will come true for us: today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

A very helpful suggestion we could all consider would be this: before coming to Sunday Mass, spend a bit of time with the readings – all three of them, over a few days. You would be surprised how even a small investment can bring the proclaimed word alive for us all.

(3) My third and final comment is this. In every age, when the church has been in a crisis, people have gone back to Scripture, both for themselves and for the community of faith, for inspiration and new vision. We find ourselves living at a very interesting time for faith – much of the cultural, institutional and intellectual support for faith has collapsed. We are each of us more responsible than ever before for what we believe and the difference it might make. To sustain our faith and to guide ourselves towards a new future of faith, we need the nourishment, wisdom and love of the Word of God, both as individuals and as a community of faith. As St Paul says in Romans 10: *So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ*. The regeneration of faith can have no other genesis than in the Word of God. This is particularly true right now as we undertake the Synodal Pathways. That whole project will be successful...if *and only if* we ground our participation in prayer, sustained by the word of God.

So, it is timely that we have a Sunday of the Word of God – as we start reading Luke, as we pray for Christian unity, as we set out on our synodal pathways together.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude with a favourite prayer of my own, not written recently. In fact it was written about seventeen centuries ago by Origen of Alexandria, a great bible scholar who died about the year AD 254. It speaks to me and perhaps it will speak to you.

Lord, inspire me to read your Scriptures and to meditate upon them day and night. I beg you to give me real understanding of what I read, that I in turn may put its precepts into practice. Yet, I know that understanding and good intentions are worthless, unless rooted in your graceful love. So I ask that the words of Scripture may also be not just signs on a page, but channels of grace into my heart. Amen.

(Origen, AD c.184-c.254)