

1st Sunday of Lent (A)  
(Genesis 2:7-9. 3:1-7 / Matthew 4:1-11)  
01.03.2020

The first thing God is said to have done in the Bible is to have spoken. Even before He created this world and all that is in it, God is said to have spoken. We read in the Book of Genesis how *God spoke and all that is came into being*. The Prologue of John's gospel reminds us of this when it states in its opening line: *In the beginning was the word*. Put simply, the word of God precedes all that is. I see today's gospel story of the Temptations of Jesus reinforcing this point for us.

Central to the text read this morning – at the very heart of the encounter between Jesus and the tempter – is the word of God contained in Sacred Scripture.

The story shows us how the tempter made a liberal, distorted, perverted use of Sacred Scripture; how he sought to manipulate the words of the Bible to serve his cause and help him arrive at his own selfish ends. Moreover, he is shown to have tried to lead Jesus in the way of error by recourse to this ploy.

Jesus, in contrast to the tempter, is presented as One who humbly submitted Himself to the word of God; One who was obedient to its message and wanted only to follow its instructions. He would not allow Himself to be tempted to manipulate the words of Scripture to make them serve His own selfish ends.

I hear today's gospel passage inviting us to embark upon our Lenten journey in a way that gives the word of God contained in Sacred Scripture its rightful place in our spiritual lives.

I hear a call addressed to us to situate ourselves as we should in regard to God's word: honestly, in a posture of humble obedience.

To pay heed to this call during the Lenten season this year seems to me to be particularly appropriate. This seems to me to be a good response to offer to the proposal made to us in this year of grace by the Church's celebration of the first *Sunday of the Word* – a commemoration which Pope Francis has introduced into the Church's annual liturgical calendar.

Pope Francis' whole concern for God's People in proposing the celebration of an annual Sunday of the Word is to lead Christians to rediscover the importance of the Sacred Scriptures in their lives. Let me quote the pope's words which explain his reasoning here. The introduction of this Sunday devoted to God's words is to help God's People *appreciate the inexhaustible riches contained in that constant dialogue between the Lord and His people* – a dialogue that should exist and be maintained in our lives at all costs.

Pope Francis is on record as having said more than once that one of the two great Dogmatic Teaching documents of the Second Vatican Council – the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* – *deserves to be read and appropriated anew at this moment in time*.

Clearly, Pope Francis sees the importance of something Pope Benedict already emphasised and drew to our attention when he convoked in 2008 a special Synod '*On the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church*'.

The Apostolic Exhortation which was composed after that international synodal gathering – a document entitled *Verbum Domini* – still merits much attention. A central emphasis in that document is what it calls *the performative character of the Word of God*. In other words, the power of God's word to change lives; its power to being about a grace of conversion in those who read it prayerfully and hear its message proclaimed in the Christian assembly.

The power of the word is particularly strong when Scripture is proclaimed and preached in the context of the sacred liturgy. Read in a liturgical context, in a special way, *the word does*

*what it says.* St Augustine makes this point when he speaks of the sacraments as being nothing other than *the word in action.*

I hear a call addressed to us for these Lenten days to pay more heed to the words we hear proclaimed in the context of the Sacred Liturgy. We should allow the scriptural words heard at the Eucharist and in other liturgical celebrations to really work upon our hearts. It is good for us to take the scripture passages read in the liturgy to our homes and personal prayer spaces to ponder them further in personal *lectio divina*. Scripture-based reflection in solitary prayer will leave the word of God the possibility to work upon our hearts all the more... so that change make take place within us, a grace of conversion may be wrought within us, and a blessing of transformation be operated in our lives.

The season of grace we are living through as Church during these years, with Pope Francis' great emphasis upon the reading of Sacred Scripture and his constant insistence upon placing the Gospel and what is essentially Christian at the heart of all things, leads me to say that the word of God is something we should be especially attentive to this Lent.

We entered into this Lenten season on Ash Wednesday with these words spoken not only into our ears, but also, and above all, it is to be hoped into our hearts: *Repent and believe in the Gospel.* We should allow that message which was spoken to us as we received ashes to resonate deep within us. The ashes we received were a sign of our desire to live a grace of conversion during these hallowed days of Lent. May we be led to turn more and more to the Gospel, to the living word of God offered to us through Sacred Scripture.

Just as all life began with the word – *God spoke and what is came into being... In the beginning was the word* – so all renewal in our Christian lives will stem from reconnection with the word of God. This amounts to giving centrality to Christ in our lives, for He is Himself *the Word made flesh.*

The Second Vatican Council spoke of the words of Scripture as *the pure and perennial source of spiritual life.* This led Pope John-Paul to remark at the beginning of the new millennium: *There is no doubt that the primacy of holiness and prayer is inconceivable without a renewed listening to the word of God.*

The gospel is the supreme rule of every evangelical life.

Just think of the evangelical inspiration that brought into being the initial monastic movement when Anthony the Great of the Desert heard a Gospel passage read in church as a word addressed directly to him: a word he was called to take to heart and act upon.

Think also of the great reforms of later times – such as that begun by Francis of Assisi.

In so many cases, it was a Gospel word that gave birth to fresh and vigorous responses to God's call in people's lives: the call to live lives totally consecrated to Him; the call to live lives with and for Him.

An early Pachomian monk, Orsiesius writes: *The Scriptures guide us to eternal life... We must consecrate ourselves incessantly to meditating upon them.*

This is what Jesus is shown to have lived in today's gospel. To every temptation set before Him, Jesus responded with a word from Scripture which refuted the error being proposed to Him by the evil one – whom it should be said also used Scriptural words (as we pointed out earlier), but did so in a perverted, manipulative way.

The kind of use of the words of Scripture by which Satan sought to convince Jesus to take the wrong path has been a permanent menace across the centuries at the heart of the life of the People of God.

Jesus warned His disciples against this menace when He spoke of the dangers associated with *false prophets* and *false teachers* who would arise within emerging Christian communities. The ill of falsity in prophecy and teaching is not something we should relegate to some bygone age or distant past. It is an ever present temptation – an ill that is forever raising its head, seeking to hold us in its grip. God knows we have seen far too many examples of this in recent decades! How much hurt and scandal this has caused and is still causing us as Church. Recent revelations around yet another leading Catholic teacher/founding-father – one who was respected and revered as a great spiritual mentor – have rocked us once again. What is most shocking in the revelations around the revelations around him – and some other charismatic/founding-father figures like him – is the fact that he used and manipulated spiritual teaching to arrive at the satisfaction of carnal desires. When spiritual teaching – including the perverted use of Sacred Scripture – is employed in this way the protocol followed is none other than that used by the tempter in today's gospel passage. The word of God is introduced to justify and promote an evil course of action. To cause confusion in this way is a satanic tactic. The harm those charismatic/founding-father figures who have deviated from the truth have caused is terribly destructive because it damages people's confidence and trust – something that stands in stark contradiction with the gospel which bids us to have confidence and trust in God's love. When anyone calls holy what is evil, when anyone tries to make pass for good something that is bad, when anyone presents as something wholesome when it is actually destructive, we are faced with are lies. We are before a most terrible travesty of the truth of God's word.

Faced with such scandalous perversions, the call for us is not to lose heart. It is to return to and take refuge in the true reference to God's word we see displayed by Jesus. It is to contradict error with truth; to confront and fight back the evil suggestions proffered with God's good word of life.

Pope Francis says simply: *I invite you to never doubt the power of the Gospel, nor its capacity to convert hearts to Christ Resurrected, and to lead people on the path to salvation, which they are waiting for deep within them.* Let us dare to take those words to heart as words addressed to us personally this morning. May they strengthen and encourage us as we set out upon our Lenten pilgrimage. Let us not fail to believe in *the power of the Gospel* to convert our hearts; to change our lives for the better; to lead us on the path of salvation – the way to freedom, which is a grace we all long for and await deep within ourselves.