

The Third Sunday of Ordinary Time January 23, 2022

In 2019, Pope Francis asked that the whole Church set aside this Sunday - the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time - to celebrate the word of God. His hope was that all Catholics would spend this day reflecting on the meaning of the Bible for our lives as Christians individually and for the Church as a whole. In particular, Pope Francis desired that we spend this Sunday talking about the place of the Scriptures in the Mass.

Since the invention of the printing press, the Bible has been widely available to Christians. Just about all of us have a copy or two of it in our homes. And that has been a great blessing. It means that we can spend time every day studying it and praying with it. We can and should have a greater familiarity with the word of God because it is so accessible to us.

But, it is only over the past five hundred years or so that this has been the case. For much of history, the Bible was not accessible to everyone. For one thing, the books of the Bible were written by hand on large scrolls. They were very costly to produce and too heavy to carry around. The only time most people would hear the word of God was in the worship service in the Temple or in their local synagogue.

Also, the Bible was written and compiled over many centuries. It began with the first five books of the Bible which our Jewish brothers and sisters call "The Torah" or "The Law." Then, over time, the other books of the Bible were composed such as the writings of the prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah and the wisdom literature which include the Book of Wisdom and Ecclesiastes. We really see the connection between worship and the Bible with the Book of Psalms which are basically songs that were sung in the Temple. It is not unlike the hymnal that we have in our pews. Just as we get to know many hymns by heart, people who faithfully attended services in the Temple got to know many of the psalms by heart.

Today's first reading is an example of how prominent the reading of the Bible was in the life of the Jewish people. This reading takes place after the people of Israel have been allowed to return to Jerusalem after they were exiled. The city was in utter ruins and the people were beginning to rebuild it along with the Temple. In the process of their work, the scrolls of the Law - that is, the first five books of the Bible - were discovered. So, the people gathered together to listen to Ezra read the Law. But, they not only listened but they responded to it. Raising their hands in the air, they cried out "Amen! Amen!" Along with hearing the word, they pledged to keep it.

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This reminds us of what we continue to do as a Christian people. At every Mass, we listen to God's word proclaimed. But, we cannot merely listen. We also have to respond. So, at the end of each reading, we say either "thanks be to God" or "praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ." By saying those words, we are promising to obey what we have heard and to put it into practice in our lives.

Why do we make that promise? Because we acknowledge that the Bible is more than the words of men who died many centuries ago. Rather, we believe that it is the word of God. Though men wrote these words in the language of their day, they were inspired by the Holy Spirit to such a degree that we can say that God Himself is the author. So, when the Scriptures are proclaimed at Mass, it is God Himself speaking to us. They are His very words. It is His heart and mind which are communicated to us. By accepting those words and promising to obey them, we are accepting and promising to obey God Himself. The opposite is also true. If we disobey the words we hear, we are disobeying God Himself. If we choose to reject the Bible, we are choosing to reject God Himself.

In today's responsorial psalm, we said together, "Your words, Lord, are Spirit and life." When we welcome God's word into our minds and into our hearts, we find spirit and life. It speaks to us of God's unconditional love for us. It teaches us about the depths of His mercy. In God's word, we find purpose for our lives. We discover that we are never alone and that our suffering is not meaningless. God's word lifts up our spirits when we are down and gives us direction when we do not know where to turn. It points out our sinfulness so that we can repent and change our behavior from destructive patterns to life-giving habits. The more we read and pray over God's word, the more we take on the mind and the heart of Jesus Christ.

Just listen to what Psalm 19 tells us about what God's word does for us who listen to it and put it into practice. It "refreshes the soul". It gives "wisdom to the simple". God's commands "rejoice the heart" and "enlighten the eye". Putting God's word - the Bible - at the center of our lives as individuals and as a community of faith will transform us beyond anything we could imagine.

We have a tradition as Catholics. Before the gospel is proclaimed, we make the sign of the cross on our foreheads, on our lips, and over our hearts. By doing so, we are asking God to place His word on our minds, to put it on our lips, and to put it in our hearts. We are also committing to reflect on the words of the gospel in our minds, to proclaim it with our lips, and to take it to heart, that is, to put it into practice. When we gather every Sunday to hear the word of God proclaimed, that is exactly what we are called to do.

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Sometime today, when we have returned home, it would be a good idea to read over today's gospel, consider its words, and ask God to reveal to us how He wants us to put Jesus' words into practice. How are we being called to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, to return sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free? Then allow the Holy Spirit - the same Spirit who wrote those words - to lead us to how they should be fulfilled in our world today.