

Homily-Shepherd of God's Word
Jeremiah 23:1-6
Ephesians 2:13-18
Mark 6:30-34
Fr. Mark Watson

In the time the Bible was written shepherds were common. Shepherds care for their flocks, provide direction and leadership for them and protect them from hostile forces. Political leaders were often called shepherds. This was true for the kings of Judah and Israel as well.

The first reading was written on the eve of the kingdom of Judah being taken into exile and the destruction of Jerusalem in the early sixth century BC. Jeremiah says, "Woe to the Shepherds who mislead and scatter the flock of my pasture." God says that he will gather the sheep and bring them back to the land to their meadow. God will appoint shepherds for them. Jeremiah then says that he will appoint a Davidic king to reign and govern his people wisely. This king will be named: "The Lord our justice." This prophecy is best lived out in the life of Jesus.

With this understanding of the first reading we can understand what we read in the Gospel.

APOSTLES GATHER AROUND JESUS

As the Gospel opens the disciples return from their mission of healing the sick, casting out demons and teaching. The disciples find Jesus and attempt to tell him all that they had done and taught. The disciples went away by themselves with Jesus. They traveled along the Western part of the Sea of Galilee. The crowds recognize Jesus and follow them.

JESUS HAS COMPASSION ON THE CROWDS

As the disciples attempt to travel to a deserted place to be with Jesus they are followed by the crowds. Instead of either attempting to escape from the crowd or sending the crowds away Jesus decides to feed the crowd. Jesus looks out over the crowd and sees that they suffer from poor leadership. Jesus sees that they are like sheep without a shepherd. The Gospel says that Jesus is moved with pity for the crowds. He shows himself to be a man of compassion. His compassion leads him to nourish the crowd with God's Word.

As I prayed over this reading I was impressed that the reading was short. In fact the reading is really the introduction to the reading which we will hear next weekend. Next weekend Jesus responds in compassion to the people by not only feeding the people with God's Word but also feeding the people's physical hunger with bread.

The reading of the feeding the people with God's Word and the later feeding of the people with bread reflects the celebration of the Eucharist. In the beginning of the Eucharist we celebrate the Liturgy of the Word in which Christ feeds us with God's Word. After the Liturgy of the Word we will be fed with the Bread of Life at the altar.

I have frequently spoken about the meaning of the Eucharist especially on Holy Thursday and Corpus Christi. Since I have never spoken about the meaning of the Liturgy of the Word, I will speak about its meaning in this liturgy.

ONE ACT OF WORSHIP

The Liturgy of the Eucharist begins with the first reading and concludes with the Creed. The Vatican II document the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy states that "the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist...are so closely connected that they form but a single act of worship." In the liturgy God works out our salvation both through word and sacrament. To understand the Liturgy of the Word we must understand that: **When God speaks something happens.**

The General Instructions of the Roman Missal 2002 states that "the table both of God's Word and Christ's Body is prepared, from which the faithful may be instructed and refreshed." The General Instructions state "**in the readings, as explained by the homily, God speaks to his people, opening up to them the mystery of redemption and salvation, and offering them spiritual nourishment; and Christ himself is present in the midst of the faithful through his word.**" **We receive spiritual nourishment both from word and sacrament. God's word is instruction, nourishment and food.**

The proclamation of the Word of God is the enactment of the Word of God here and now, which action and event become operative for us in a unique way in and through the liturgy.

We assume that the words on the page have to do only with conveying ideas and information. In point of fact, the biblical witness and the liturgical experience of the scriptures are based on something very different. It presumes that when the word is announced in the liturgy, precisely through the announcement, something happens. **Words are proclaimed at liturgy so that God can do something among us for our salvation.**

LET THERE BE LIGHT

The first reading in the Easter Vigil helps us to understand what we celebrate in the Liturgy of the Word. After the blessing of the new fire, and the acclamation of the summary of salvation history in the Exultet, the Liturgy of the Word begins with the reading from Genesis 1. In this reading we hear the account of creation proclaimed. In verse three we hear, "Then God said 'Let there be'..." and what God said came to be, on that day and on subsequent days of creation. What God said happened.

The same thing happens in the liturgy. What God says not only happened once and for all but happens still in the here and now when the scriptures are proclaimed. The power of the proclaimed word is that it causes something to happen among us.

When we hear this reading at the Easter Vigil we are recreated and given new life.

READING IN THE SYNOGUE IN NAZARETH

The account which presents the beginning of Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of Luke (4:14-20) also helps us understand what we experience in the Liturgy of the Word. In this account Jesus goes to the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. Jesus stands up to do the reading. Jesus read from a scroll containing the reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah. The scroll contains God's revelation and self-communication through words that recount deeds, saving deeds that together constitute a saving history.

Jesus reads:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
 Because he has anointed me
 To bring glad tidings to the poor.
 He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives,
 And recovery of sight to the blind,
 To let the oppressed go free,
 And to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.

Rolling up the scroll, he handed it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him. **He said to them, "today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing."**

Jesus speaks of his saving vocation among us. After making his proclamation Jesus says, "Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." What Jesus proclaimed also happened -- God's favor was unleashed in this proclamation through Jesus himself.

What Jesus read and did at the synagogue in Nazareth happened then and there and subsequently throughout his ministry on earth. He himself was what Isaiah had said God's servant would be. That day the scriptures became what they proclaimed – the making real here and now of God's gracious and saving acts of salvation – in the person of the incarnate word of God.

Just as Jesus did when he read in the synagogue in Nazareth, so we do when we celebrate the Liturgy of the Word during the Mass. When we experience the Liturgy of the Word: we revere the books containing the readings, we proclaim selected texts, and we respond to them in faith, and in so doing we experience once more and again and again their saving power. What we hear happens. What we proclaim occurs. What the word says becomes an act of grace and favor for us here and now, for our salvation and for our more complete union with God.

Every time we proclaim the scriptures at liturgy "they are fulfilled in our hearing." What we hear as God's good news of salvation breaks into our gathering. Among other things, it challenges us by melting our stony hearts and leading us to lives of deeper conversion.

We proclaim the words so that here and now we can experience that same saving action of God among us just as fully and really as when the biblical events occurred.

MAKING MEMORY

When I preach on the meaning of the Eucharist I always speak about our remembering the saving mysteries of our faith – the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ. In this remembrance the bread and wine becoming the Body and Blood of Christ and in so doing God works out our salvation in our lives. Fr. Kevin Irwin writes, "The biblical background of "making memory" means that when we engage in the liturgy – by word and sacramental action – God does something. God acts on our behalf. **Through liturgical memorial we are drawn into God's eternal act of salvation, re-creation, and redemption.**"

Again Irwin writes, "We do not just 'remind ourselves' of what God did. What liturgical memorial involves is God's working through the proclamation of biblical narratives and their compliment in sacramental actions to act as savior for us again and again."

"The gift of liturgy is that it sets before us the key, central, privileged, and unique way in which God works among us here and now to save and redeem us."

“Saving history does not mean what happened a long time ago. Rather saving history means that God did act in the history of humanity definitively and directly for the chosen people of Israel and then most demonstratively in Jesus, and that what occurs in our time is the reiteration of that action in our histories, here and now, in the present and for whatever future God has in store for us. We are drawn into the Old Testament stories. **They occur for us here and now. Through them we are re-created and renewed.**”

THANKS BE TO GOD AND PRAISE TO YOU LORD JESUS CHRIST.

There are various responses that we make over and over again in the Mass. Often we make these responses without reflecting on their meaning. After the first two readings are proclaimed we say “Thanks be to God” and after the Gospel is proclaimed we respond “Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ.” What do we mean when we make these responses? In both responses we are assenting to the active and effective proclamation of the scriptures in the liturgy. In the words of Kevin Irwin, “We are committing ourselves to allowing them to challenge us, to confront us, and to chasten us. We invite the powerful word to change our minds, hearts, and wills. At the same time we invite that same proclaimed word to console and comfort us. We invite God’s word to turn our experience of defeat to victory and admission of sin to an experience of God’s reconciling love. **What God says through those texts is as effective and powerful as it was when the events recounted in them happened and when the author(s) crafted them into books for our formation in the faith.**”

When we assent to the proclaimed Word of God in today’s Mass we are assenting to follow Jesus as did the disciples and to live lives of compassion as did Jesus.

SPEAK LORD YOUR SERVANT IS LISTENING

My favorite verse in private prayer is, “Speak Lord your servant is listening.” This verse is taken from the Book of Kings. It is from the interchange between the boy Samuel and the priest Eli in the temple in Jerusalem. The original context for this passage is a time when revelations from God were few and really unexpected. Eli and Samuel were asleep. Eli recognizes that God is trying to speak through Samuel to spread God’s word and thus to renew the dynamic of his speaking to Israel and leading them as his chosen people.

God’s call to us is to do two things: to listen and to respond to God’s call. I propose that we not only use this as a way of asking God to speak to us in our private prayer life but that it become the attitude of our lives during the Mass. During the Mass may our entire life be a prayer of openness to God. Let us pray with our entire lives: “Speak Lord your servant is listening.”

LISTENING

At Jesus the Good Shepherd after our lectors proclaim God's Word they step back and pause for a moment that we can absorb God's Word. The church tells us that during the Liturgy of the Word we are to be open to God's Word through silence. Do we listen when God's Word is proclaimed? WE LIVE IN A SOCIETY THAT IS OFTEN DISTRACTED BY TV, RADIO, PERSONAL CD PLAYERS AS WE GO ABOUT OUR SHOPPING, EXERCISING, SEWING OR COOKING. DO WE CHOOSE TO REALLY LISTEN TO WHAT WE HEAR IN ORDER TO DIRECT THE WAY WE THINK AND ACT? Let us truly listen to God's Word so that it can re-create and transform us.

BIBLE STUDIES

It gives me great pride that many members of our parish are involved in Small Faith Communities that study God's Word. There are groups on Wednesday night, Thursday night, between the Masses on Sunday, and on Wednesday during the day. I commend these parishioners for their study of the Bible. I propose that all parishioners study the scriptures from your homes so that you will be open to receiving God's Word.

As we approach the Eucharistic table let us allow the Eucharist to strengthen us so that we can both listen to and live out God's Word.

Let our our prayer in this Mass be "Speak Lord your Servant is listening."