



The Holy See

SUNDAY OF THE WORD OF GOD

HOLY MASS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

St. Peter's Basilica

Third Sunday of Ordinary Time, 23 January 2022

[Multimedia]

In the first reading and in the Gospel, we find two parallel acts. Ezra the priest lifts up the book of the law of God, opens it and reads it aloud before the people. Jesus, in the synagogue of Nazareth, opens the scroll of the Sacred Scripture and reads a passage of the prophet Isaiah in the presence of all. Both scenes speak to us of a fundamental reality: at the heart of the life of God's holy people and our journey of faith are not ourselves and our own words. At its heart is God and his word.

Everything started with the word that God spoke to us. In Christ, his eternal Word, the Father "chose us before the foundation of the world" (*Eph* 1:4). By that Word, he created the universe: "he spoke, and it came to be" (*Pss* 33:9). From of old, he spoke to us through the prophets (cf. *Heb* 1:1), and finally, in the fullness of time (cf. *Gal* 4:4), he sent us that same Word, his only-begotten Son. That is why, in the Gospel, after reading from Isaiah, Jesus says something completely unexpected: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled" (*Lk* 4:21). Fulfilled: the word of God is no longer a promise, but is now fulfilled. In Jesus, it has taken flesh. By the power of the Holy Spirit, it has come to dwell among us and it desires to continue to dwell in our midst, in order to fulfil our expectations and to heal our wounds.

Sisters and brothers, let us keep our gaze fixed on Jesus, like those in the synagogue of Nazareth (cf. v. 20). They kept looking at him, for he was one of them, and asking, "What is this novelty?"

What will he do, this one, about whom everyone is speaking?” And let us embrace his word. Today let us reflect on two interconnected aspects of this: *the word reveals God* and *the word leads us to man*. The word is at the centre: it reveals God and leads us to man.

First, *the word reveals God*. Jesus, at the beginning of his mission, commenting on the words of the prophet Isaiah, announces a clear decision: he has come to liberate the poor and the oppressed (cf. v. 18). In this way, precisely through the scriptures, he reveals the face of God as one who cares for our poverty and takes to heart our destiny. God is not an overlord (*padrone*), aloof and on high – an ugly but untrue image of God – but a Father (*Padre*) who follows our every step. He is no cold bystander, detached and impassible, a “God of mathematics”. He is God-with-us, passionately concerned about our lives and engaged in them, even sharing our tears. He is no neutral and indifferent god, but the Spirit, the lover of mankind, who defends us, counsels us, defends us, sustains us and partakes of our pain. He is always present. This is the “good news” (v. 18) that Jesus proclaims to the amazement of all: God is close at hand, and he wants to care for me and for you, for everyone. That is how God is: close. He even defines himself as closeness. In Deuteronomy, he says to the people: “What other people has gods as close to them as I am to you?” (cf. *Deut* 4:7). A God of closeness, of compassionate and tender closeness. He wants to relieve the burdens that crush you, to warm your wintry coldness, to brighten your daily dreariness and to support your faltering steps. This he does by his word, by the word he speaks to rekindle hope amid the ashes of your fears, to help you rediscover joy in the labyrinths of your sorrows, to fill with hope your feelings of solitude. He makes you move forward, not in a labyrinth, but on a daily journey to find him.

Brothers and sisters: let us ask ourselves: do we bear within our hearts this liberating image of God, the God of closeness, compassion and tenderness, or do we think of him as a merciless judge, an accountant who keeps a record of every moment of our lives? Is ours a faith that generates hope and joy, or, among us, a faith still weighed down by fear, a fearful faith? What is the face of God that we proclaim in the Church? The Saviour who liberates and heals, or the Terrifying God who burdens us with feelings of guilt? In order to convert us to the true God, Jesus shows us where to start: from his word. That word, by telling us the story of God’s love for us, liberates us from the fears and preconceptions about him that stifle the joy of faith. That word overthrows false idols, unmask our projections, destroys our all too human images of God and brings us back to see his true face, his mercy. The word of God nurtures and renews faith: let us put it back at the centre of our prayer and our spiritual life! Let us put at the centre the word that reveals to us what God is like. The word that draws us close to God.

Now the second aspect: *the word leads us to man*. To God and to man. Precisely when we discover that God is compassionate love, we overcome the temptation to shut ourselves up in a religiosity reduced to external worship, one that fails to touch and transform our lives. This is idolatry, hidden and refined, but idolatry all the same. God’s word drives us to go forth from ourselves and to encounter our brothers and sisters solely with the quiet power of God’s liberating

love. That is exactly what Jesus shows us in the synagogue of Nazareth: he has been sent forth to the poor – all of us – to set them free. He has not come to deliver a set of rules or to officiate at some religious ceremony; rather, he has descended to the streets of our world in order to encounter our wounded humanity, to caress faces furrowed by suffering, to bind up broken hearts and to set us free from chains that imprison the soul. In this way, he shows us the worship most pleasing to God: caring for our neighbour. We need to come back to this. Whenever in the Church there are temptations to rigidity, which is a perversion, whenever we think that finding God means becoming more rigid, with more rules, right things, clear things... it is not the way. When we see proposals of rigidity, let us think immediately: this is an idol, it is not God. Our God is not that way.

Sisters and brothers, the word of God changes us. Rigidity does not change us, it hides us; the word of God changes us. It penetrates our soul like a sword (cf. *Heb 4:12*). If, on the one hand it consoles us by showing us the face of God, on the other, it challenges and disturbs us, reminding us of our inconsistencies. It shakes us up. It does not bring us peace at the price of accepting a world rent by injustice and hunger, where the price is always paid by the weakest. They always end up paying. God's word challenges the self-justification that makes us blame everything that goes wrong on other persons and situations. How much pain do we feel in seeing our brothers and sisters dying at sea because no one will let them come ashore! And some people do this in God's name. The word of God invites us to come out into the open, not to hide behind the complexity of problems, behind the excuse that "nothing can be done about it" or "it's somebody else's problem", or "what can I do?", "leave them there". The word of God urges us to act, to combine worship of God and care for man. For sacred scripture has not been given to us for our entertainment, to coddle us with an angelic spirituality, but to make us go forth and encounter others, drawing near to their wounds. I spoke of rigidity, that modern pelagianism that is one of the temptations of the Church. And this other temptation, that of seeking an angelic spirituality, is to some extent the other temptation today: gnostic movements, a gnosticism, that proposes a word of God that puts you "in orbit" and does not make you touch reality. The Word that became flesh (cf. *Jn 1:14*) wishes to become flesh in us. His word does not remove us from life, but plunges us into life, into everyday life, into listening to the sufferings of others and the cry of the poor, into the violence and injustice that wound society and our world. It challenges us, as Christians, not to be indifferent, but active, creative Christians, prophetic Christians.

"*Today*" – says Jesus – "this scripture has been fulfilled" (*Lk 4:21*). The Word wishes to take flesh today, in the times in which we are living, not in some ideal future. A French mystic of the last century, who chose to experience the Gospel in the peripheries, wrote that the word of God is not "a 'dead letter'; it is spirit and life... The listening that the word of the Lord demands of us is our 'today': the circumstances of our daily life and the needs of our neighbour" (Madeleine Delbr el, *La joie de croire*, Paris, 1968). Let us ask, then: do we want to imitate Jesus, to become ministers of liberation and consolation for others, putting the word into action? Are we a Church that is docile to the word? A Church inclined to listen to others, engaged in reaching out to raise up our brothers and sisters from all that oppresses them, to undo the knots of fear, to liberate those most

vulnerable from the prisons of poverty, from interior ennui and the sadness that stifles life? Isn't that what we want?

In this celebration, some of our brothers and sisters will be *instituted as readers and catechists*. They are called to the important work of serving the Gospel of Jesus, of proclaiming him, so that his consolation, his joy and his liberation can reach everyone. That is also the mission of each one of us: to be credible messengers, prophets of God's word in the world. Consequently, let us grow passionate about sacred scripture, let us be willing to dig deep within the word that reveals God's newness and leads us tirelessly to love others. Let us put the word of God at the centre of the Church's life and pastoral activity! In this way, we will be liberated from all rigid pelagianism, from all rigidity, set free from the illusion of a spirituality that puts you "in orbit", unconcerned about caring for our brothers and sisters. Let us put the word of God at the centre of the Church's life and pastoral activity. Let us listen to that word, pray with it, and put it into practice.