



The Word...

God, in your goodness, you have made a home for the poor.
The father of orphans and the defender of widows is God in his holy dwelling.

God gives a home to the forsaken;
he leads forth prisoners to prosperity.

(from Ps 68)

“When you hold a banquet,
invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind;
blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you.
For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

(from Lk 14:1, 7-14)

Pondering the Word...

Jesus is attending a Shabbat meal at the home of an important Pharisee. He looks around to see other influential, wealthy people vying for the best seats. So what does he tell the host? “The next time you invite people over, let me bring some of my friends: the poor, widows and orphans, the blind and lame.” I am sure the Pharisee and his guests are aghast. *What* is this guy talking about?

Well, here’s what he’s talking about: the wisdom of Ben Sira in the Book of Sirach and the admonitions in the Psalms, in Proverbs, Deuteronomy 15, Isaiah 58, Ezekiel, Amos and all the other prophets. He will soon say it in his own words in Matthew 25, in Luke 20, and his followers, Paul, James, and John will repeat them in their letters to the faithful.

While we might be familiar with Jesus’ teachings about sheltering the homeless and feeding the poor, there is no shortage of God’s commands about social justice in the Old Testament; in fact, the words of the prophets are much more clear and direct. We would do well to read and understand what these words say to us today.

*“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?*

Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter?” (Isaiah 58:6-7)

Living the Word...

Several of our reflections this week are about opening ourselves to the messages in Scripture. All too often, the words roll over us without being allowed to take root. I encourage you to read Scripture every day and to read it as if you have never heard or read it before. Don’t make it a checklist item. If you can only get through a verse or two without losing focus, then stick with that. Think about the words. Look at them as if you would look at a multifaceted gem. See if any one word or image speaks to your heart and then sit quietly. Repeat the word or words if it helps you to come to stillness. After some time in quiet, speak to God about what you have felt, sensed, or learned. Perhaps God will respond; perhaps not, but trust that your prayer has been heard.

Personal Reflections and Ideas...

Sep 2: *When the people in the synagogue heard this, they were all filled with fury. They rose up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill to hurl him down headlong. (Lk 4:16-30)*

The versions of this story in Matthew and Mark say, *"They took offense at him."* Luke's interpretation of "offense" is pretty dramatic! People don't like to hear that they are no better than their ancestors. We don't like to admit we make the same mistakes, take the same things for granted that humans have been doing for millennia. That's why I challenge people to read Scripture, not as bible study or history and not as allegory, but as the account of humanity's interaction with the Divine. If we fail to recognize ourselves and our stories in those of the ancients, we fail to learn, we fail to grow. With trust in God's mercy and unconditional love, let's open up to the sometimes difficult lessons Scripture has to teach us.

Sep 3: *"What is there about his word?" (Lk 4:31-37)*

What are the words Jesus says that strike a chord—or hit a nerve—in you? You'll be sitting at Sunday Mass or services, listening to the same old reading when some word or passage will perk up your ears. Do you pay attention to that prompting or do you let it go? When this happens, take some quiet time afterwards, while it is still fresh in your mind and heart, to ask the Spirit to enlighten you. If there's a passage that always seems to make you uncomfortable, there is likely a message in it for you. Take it to prayer or seek the guidance of a spiritual director to see if you can uncover gift of wisdom the Spirit has for you.

Sep 4: *"We give thanks to God when we pray for you, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love that you have for all the holy ones because of the hope reserved for you in heaven." (Col 1:1-8)*

If you take this brief passage at face value, it sounds like Paul is saying the Colossians love because of their hope for a heavenly reward. But we know genuine love is not based on what we gain. Paul is saying that the Good News, of the promise of Christ Jesus fills us with hope and faith and joy, the direct result of which is the desire to love all God's children, for each in made in God's image. Do you love all God's children, all of God's creation? Why do you love? Because you are 'supposed to' in order to gain heaven? Or do you love because the love of God within you can do nothing but overflow to the world around? It's not easy to love this way, but let's give a try. (See Friday's reflection. If we start the day with joy, true love in Christ is not as difficult.)

Sep 5: *When they brought their boats to the shore, they left everything and followed him. (Lk 5:1-11)*

We marvel at the willingness of those first disciples to leave everything behind to follow Jesus, and indeed, it is remarkable. But remember, they've heard Jesus teaching, they've seen him perform miracles, including healing Simon's mother-in-law. In short, they've heard his word and it has struck a chord in them. We talked on Tuesday about the importance of listening for the Spirit's promptings. If you struggle to find the strength to follow Jesus, take time to really listen to the words he is saying to you. Open your eyes to the everyday miracles that surround you. It is easier to follow Jesus when you hear and see him everywhere.

Sep 6: *"Sing joyfully to the LORD, all you lands; come before him with joyful song." (Ps 100)*

I read a quote the other day from an anonymous source: *"If you only pray when you're in trouble....you're in trouble."* I don't totally agree with the sentiment—God knows we are like Peter and cry out, "Lord, save me" more often than we say thanks or express praise and joy. In fact, many of the words spoken in rote prayer and in the liturgy focus more on our unworthiness juxtaposed with God's mercy than outright joy for God's unconditional love. Our prayer can be self-centered. We often start the day with prayers of petition: "help me deal with this person today;" "grant me knowledge to pass the math test;" "let the results of my medical test be good news." And we often end the day with a litany of what we did wrong, asking for forgiveness. Nothing wrong here—we are praying—but when was the last time we started or ended the day with a joyful song? Just praising and thanking God for the wonder of creation, for just being God and loving us. I bet God loves it when we do that! Give it a try and see what a difference it can make in your day.

Sep 7: *Persevere in the faith, firmly grounded, stable, not shifting from the hope of the Gospel you heard..."(Col 1:21-23)*

I talk with a lot of people whose sense of hope is being challenged these days. I know my own is and I have to be careful not to sink into ambivalence, but rather to bolster my hope through communal worship, prayer, and fasting from skepticism and bitterness. Pray today for a renewed sense of hope for ourselves and for the world.