

Scripture in the Liturgy

Part Two

Last week I pointed out the tenuous nature of the Church's "possession" of the Word of God, and suggested that rather than thinking of it as a secure and infallible store of wisdom firmly enclosed within the safe binding, the black-and-white print, the so-called "plain truth of the Gospel message", it is actually something as delicate and vulnerable as the promises we make to one another, and the understanding of ourselves and the world and God which so often fails us. It is exactly as prone to damage and extinction today as it was when the soldiers hammered in the nails on Good Friday.

As one of you pointed out, this makes of the saints - in whose number I count your Holinesses - a vital part of God's chain of communication with the world. In the saints the Word continues to become flesh, in exactly the personal way that it did in Matthew or John. Or, of course, Peter and Judas: for *Wisdom is proved right by all her children*, and not just the holy ones. On Good Friday too, *his friends all stood at a distance*.

Note that the uncertainty and tenuousness of the Word of God has nothing to do with God. As we were saying last week, the One Word of God is in itself firm and eternal, with all the eternal firmness of God himself: *the Word is with God eternally, and the Word is God*. His justice is unchangeable, forever sure. It's where it is entrusted, *as by God's will it must be*, to human flesh, to the stream of time, and to our limitations, that the Word becomes subject to alteration and to variegation. What happens to white light, in the prism which divides it into rainbow shades: what happens to any event, as it is told to friend and enemy, becoming good and bad news in different camps: what happens to any person who is sent into the world, and becomes both appreciated and despised, loved and hated, understood and refused understanding, all of this happens to the Word of God.

Some people, impatient with this unwholesome situation, take the bull by the horns, and impose their own "eternal firmness" on the proclamation of the Word. They gleefully issue black-and-white statements, hone up the cutting-edge of anathemas, and found inquisitions and build gibbets to give the Almighty a helping hand with his public relations. They simply cloud the waters of human history with bigotry, and make the communions they represent unacceptable to anyone who does not run with them.

And yet the Word is with God, and the Word is God.

The ultimate dramatising of this truth is the story of Jesus himself, whose coming into the world was formally, judicially rejected (*by force and by law he was taken - would anyone plead his cause?*) but who found also a love and obedience which led us to worship him: and *to all who did accept him, he gave power to become children of God*.

The Word of God today is delivered into the hands of that same world. Our vocation and duty is to be worthy of his presence in our midst, and to bear witness as fully as we possibly can to the reality and vital importance of his coming. No-one has more cause to do this than those who are called by him to be his heralds and ministers in the world: amongst whom we count in a very special way those who read the Scriptures in the Liturgy, and those who are privileged to hear them.

How Is The Word To Be Received And Proclaimed?

Last week we were thinking of the frightening speed with which we are hurtling away from the Biblical world. What is happening to us is that what the New Testament calls “the World” in the bad sense - the world that rejects its Maker and his Christ - is ever more present to us, determining our meaning with greater and greater authority. More and more, our faith and the world addressed by the Word of God tends to diminish into a microclimate, privatised and segregated, cloistered. We co-operate with this process, in order to protect our precious sense of God’s presence from the surly realism of the Godless world outside. But we mistake our rôle in this. What we are avoiding is nothing less than the Cross itself. We reflect instead the Peter who says: *Lord, this must not happen to you!* - factoring in a small bodyguard element, or perhaps planning to nick off over the wall in Gethsemane - and we risk the Lord’s response: *Get behind me Satan! You are an obstacle in my path: because you are thinking not in God’s way, but in man’s.*

It is essential that the world *should* clash with the Word, through which it was made; and we are the ones who must help it to happen. We must denounce, like prophets, cleanse the Temple, like Jesus, announce the Incarnation, like the Archangel Gabriel. Deacons should do this in preaching and in serving the poor. Priests should do this when they preach the Gospel and gather their communities. Bishops should do it when they lead their churches. The Pope should do it when he addresses the whole Church, and the World in the name of the Church.

But we should *all* do it when we make our lives subject to the Kingdom of God and his justice. None of this can happen if we stay safely in the nursery, like forgotten hyacinths in the airing-cupboard, or greenhouse plants that cannot bear the strength of the wind. Pope John decreed the breaking-open of the painted-in windows of the Church, the opening of the doors to let in the light, and the wind, and the other peoples of the world. We’re still waiting for the full consequences of Pope John’s vision to dawn on us.

We are not alone in this moment of judgment. We have our hands on the Sacraments of God, and the Eternal Word is ready to become flesh in us. To waken to the sacramental field of power in which we stand is the prime need the Church has today, and it has always been the same. Saints are the ones who awaken to it. Those who remain asleep and unaware are yet to hear, much less to do, the Word.

Letting The Liturgy Form Us

I have the joy on a Sunday of inhabiting the liturgically live area at the East End of St Hugh’s. I do most of the talking, and most of the actions. I get to wear special clothes, and everybody who comes has to listen to what I say. For at least three hours every Sunday I have some form of attention from hundreds of people, and very few other people in Lincoln can say as much.

However, I’m not entirely happy about this situation. Because the vast majority of those who share this time with me are showing few signs of life, and I feel as if I’m giving some sort of performance in front of an audience. Most of them don’t make any sound. Many of them don’t even take up a hymn-book or a Mass-sheet, or threaten to make any sound. I suspect that they’ve actually reached a decision that they won’t show any outward sign of participation beyond the submission of bodily posture: they will kneel for the Eucharistic Prayer, stand for the Gospel. But this doesn’t extend to anything dramatic, like raising their own voice, like bowing the head at the name of Jesus, or like bowing the whole body for the Incarnation clause of the Creed. Maybe we wouldn’t like anyone to think that the safety of the benched part of the Church has been invaded by the evident religious mania which has taken possession in the Sanctuary. If the congregation is forced into a procession, even from

the back of the Church to the Sanctuary, it will take the form of a simple stepping into the back bench, or the first empty one after it. *Nowt to do wi' me, mate!* The preservation of private devotion and personal space renders it necessary for the weekday congregation of 30 people to be dispersed like a cubic foot of sulphuretted hydrogen into an equalised distribution over the seven thousand square feet of the floor. God forbid we should have to acknowledge that there are other people here doing the same thing that we are! The distance people will travel to offer each other the sign of peace - only to retreat immediately to their solitary space - makes Camp David and the Yalta conference look like a doddle. I think they deserve the Nobel Prize for travelling the extra mile for peace.

The trouble is that *this* is “the Liturgy that forms us”: not some ideal business inspired by the Trinity, refined by the Fathers of the Church, enriched by poets, composers and architects, but this ill-natured, depressing, neglected thing which I could sometimes frankly forgive anyone for missing. It's noisy, ugly, unco-ordinated, and uncared-for. It leaves me exhausted and low on a regular basis, and I can't seem to convince anyone to put in the work and exercise the talent that is required to heal it and get it to stand up and be beautiful. It has a mind of its own that resists change, and this is extraordinarily sad.

But I don't want this series of talks to become grounded in the practical. We can do a lot to make things better by changing our practical approach. But the real difficulty is a spiritual one. Part of the problem is that the first half of the celebration - the liturgy of the Word - can only be celebrated properly if the people are listening *in order to be changed*. Let us listen again to the first reading of all the Advent Eucharists: Isaiah, of course, and (as I promised mentally to tell you last week) the *first* Isaiah, delivering a vocation to Israel while it still had the Temple, the slopes of mount Zion, and the City of Peace in which both of them rose.

Read the Reading (Is 2:1-5)

I wonder how far people sit down on the first Sunday of Advent with a real feeling of excitement, ready to make a new beginning. Given that they do, how do they hear that invitation to climb the Lord's mountain to be taught? In what sense do they hear the words: *the Law will go out from Zion, and the oracle of the Lord from Jerusalem?* What have we to do with Jerusalem?

The reading goes on to talk of God's wielding authority over many nations, judging the Gentiles: and these will *hammer their swords into ploughshares, their spears into sickles*. Will anyone have acted in a new way after hearing the first reading last Sunday? Indeed, can anyone - apart from your present Holinesses, who have just heard it again - remember what last Sunday's first reading said? Will any raised voice or clenched fist have relaxed on its account? The lovely words should remain with us, as an Advent invitation to new life: *O House of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord*. But how many Catholics would think of themselves as “the House of Jacob”, or “the posterity promised to Abraham”, or (scanning Isaiah 3 for this Sunday next year) as “Children of God the Father, clay in the hands of the potter”, or, in year 3, Jeremiah's “virtuous branch for David”?

In these words God is addressing his people, and people addressed by God might, one would think, sit up and take notice. If they don't, is it because of something we are doing or not doing? Last week I suggested that we have not done our homework - and that goes for priests and deacons quite as much as lay people - and that we are therefore unable to understand the language that is used to us in the Scriptures. Much worse, the words don't reach our hearts. This is partly because we haven't learned how to hear these words with the heart. But far more than that: we haven't heard them *as a people*. If these words had impacted us *as parishes*, so that we might look to change our parishes into living signs of what the Word says, then the world would change too.

Imagine a grouping of people who are truly sharing their destiny. Let us suppose that the Lord isn't joking when he says to us:

If the world hates you, remember that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. But because you do not belong to the world, because my choosing you has withdrawn you from the world, therefore the world hates you.

Listening to that *as an individual* is only possible because the word "you" in modern English is both singular and plural (which is a good example of how our language has developed into something less precise than it used to be). Jesus is addressing his disciples as a group, and that group represents the "little children" who have heard his Word and welcomed it: in other words, the first tiny Church itself. Yet the Church is addressed *in intimate terms*, so that it becomes clear that we are to hear these words *in community*; the Last Supper Discourse in John has this quality all the way through. It is vital for the whole Church, yet it is voiced for eleven followers in the intimacy of the upper room, that is, the real, grass-roots Eucharistic community. In listening to it correctly, therefore, even a vast church full of hundreds of people attains the intimacy of the Last Supper; and a tiny group gathered around a humble altar hears the Word of God to the whole Church.

The intimacy of these words is coloured by the consciousness that listening to them is only possible for those who accept withdrawal from the world: and it is only when this withdrawal has taken some recognisable form in the individual lives of the listeners that the reading will make sense. I once asked a Columban Father who had been under sentence of death in the Philippines, what it had been like in the holding-cell. "Well," he said, "the Psalms seemed suddenly to make more sense!" Let us imagine, to make the point, these words of Jesus being read by a group of prisoners who have been condemned for their faith, and are on death row. Their lives on earth have shrunk to a few hours, but they are at least together. Sharing the extreme fate of martyrs, they find the words addressing them with precision. They have *found their place* in the register of the Gospel, just as the world has decided there is no place in it for them. How vital it is to them that they are addressed together! Think of the intimacy they would gain from such an understanding. The Gospel continues:

I have told you all this so that you may not fall away. They will expel you from the synagogues, and indeed the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is doing a holy service to God. They will do these things because they have never known either the Father or me. But I have told you all this, so that when the time for it comes, you may remember that I told you.

Now, you will next hear those words read out in Church on the fifth Saturday and sixth Monday of Easter. But I hope that when you do, you will find it easier to recall that the true place to hear them is in a community far more intimate and united than the scattered parishioners dotted between fifty benches of an echoing gothic church has any chance of being.

Can this awareness be used as an engine for change? My own idea and hope is that we could turn our church from a sort of service-station for private religion - that unchristian place where it is essential that people should remain in lonely isolation before a distant God - into a place of genuine Christian community. But I have also a fear that we could only do that by creating a sort of élite group, thus isolating even further those incapable of belonging to it. I'm quite sure that the attention we pay to the two wings of the Liturgy - Word and Sacrament - is, now and always, the place where our faith will grow sound. That's why I think to study specifically the place of the Word within the Liturgy is so positive a move. Of

course there's plenty of scriptural study to be done, all of it most useful; there's also a vast spiritual field to be ploughed, individually and together. But we actually touch the Word of life in our reading out of, and our listening to, the Scripture at Mass, and I really believe that those involved in doing that work are the ones who must begin to liberate the Word from the straitjacket into which it has been stuffed.

So my first practical suggestion in this course is that people who read should pray about this ministry, asking the Holy Spirit for the grace to fill their minds with insight into what precisely they are doing in the Liturgy. We should stand before the Lectern, knowing that we stand in front of people God wants to address, using our mind, heart, and voice. We should know that above us is the eternal, unchanging Word, in whose wisdom we were all created, and in whose providence lies our path to happiness.

But those who listen have no less responsibility for the fate of the Word of God. It wouldn't make any difference how beautifully the Word was announced by reader or preacher, unless the listeners did their part. There is a symbiosis here: the ministers of the Word perform their part in exact response to the listeners' way of performing theirs. The letter to the Hebrews says: *Your leaders watch over your souls because they must give an account of them. Make this a joy for them to do, and not a grief: you yourselves would be the losers.* Good listening leads on to good preaching and good reading. I believe we should remember how vulnerable the Word is in our hands at this moment of its proclamation: all that it will have to struggle against in order to be heard: the strident voices of the World in its seat of power, which leaves none of us unaffected; the self-centredness of us and of our listeners, so often submitting even God's Word to our own taste or judgment: the immense capacity we all have for inattention, in which we forget that God speaks to us in this personal and living encounter. Of course, an encounter takes at least two; Christ meets us every moment without our meeting him. For Jesus, risen and eternal, our every moment is a living encounter; but for us, our meeting with him is something we allow to happen only rarely.

Therefore we must take care of our Liturgy of the Word. We should be determined that no dereliction of ours should insert any barrier or stumbling-block for its listeners. Above all, by our careful and attentive behaviour we should witness to the tremendous significance of what we are about, so that nothing casual or routine may be read into our ministry.

Such truly ministerial behaviour doesn't come easily, which is why we need to pray earnestly about the whole mystery of the Word becoming flesh, and its manifestation in the Liturgy. It is worth remembering that, in those church communities of the Reformation where the understanding of the Eucharist has decayed, the same attention and dignity we accord to the Real Presence in the Blessed Sacrament is accorded to the reading of the divine Word. During the unfortunately-titled Counter-reformation, it was seen as *de rigueur* to deny or even oppose everything the Reformation had done. Thus the Lutheran demand for the Cup for all at the Eucharist resulted in its being denied to Catholics for the next four hundred years; not because the Lord didn't command us to *take this and drink it, all of you*, but because *Martin Luther* had repeated those words, and the Church Catholic would take no orders from Martin Luther. We should show our true colours, and acknowledge the realisation of the second Vatican Council, that there is a Real Presence of Christ in the Scripture, which in the Mass becomes a kind of Sacrament. Everyone who takes part in the delivery of a kind of sacrament is a kind of Sacramental Minister. We can therefore learn a great deal about this ministry from the other Church communities, who can in their turn learn from us a great deal about the Eucharist. After all, we shall never do wrong by increasing our veneration for the Word of God.

