

Receiving The Word

A paragraph from *The Word of the Lord* by David N Power, O.M.I. Orbis, 2001
(ISBN 1 - 57075 - 397 - 0)

While this openness to the infinite is a necessary disposition of spirit, it has to be accompanied by a willingness to be disturbed. Though highly alert to historical development, and to the historical conditioning of the expression of truth, people today may feel that it is this *openness to a sense of the transcendent* which itself constitutes the hearing of God's Word. It is typical of people in our contemporary Western society, indeed even among Christians, to give great weight to the getting to the person's internal self-awareness or consciousness of the self. When judged sincere and genuine, this may be taken as a guarantee of truth and arbiter of interpretation. True readiness to respond, however, tells us that this is not so. God, and the call of the Gospel, lie *beyond* human self-awareness, and with their claims, their maxims, and their stories they continue to disrupt our sense of identity and our command of the truth, asking for the willingness to give ourselves over to the Word that creates us, and judges us, and leads us whither we do not know and cannot anticipate. (p 16)

Some points for further reflection

1. Even though the Church was the locus for the creation of the New Testament documents, we must acknowledge that the Word entrusted to it is never delivered "pure and simple", but in a way that is qualified by the concerns of those celebrating the Liturgy, and their own understanding of what they choose to read on a given occasion. These may differ, subtly, or sometimes wholesale, from the concerns of the original writer.

We may also find ourselves differing from the Church of the past in our understanding of what the Word means. The Lectionary introduction says that the readings ought to be delivered in the Latin Vulgate or in vernacular translations approved by the Bishops' Conferences. The idea of reading the Latin text of Jerome is an odd one for us; but it implies a fidelity to the *interpretation* of texts of a bygone era. Here is an example: Psalm 8 vv 4b-5.

- *The Hebrew Psalm says:*

What is Man that you are mindful of him, and the Son of Man, that you cared for him? Yet you have made him little less than God, and you crown him with glory and honour. You gave him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet.

- *The Greek letter to the Hebrews 2:6-8 quotes the Psalm thus:*

What is Man that you are mindful of him, and the Son of Man that you care for him? You made him for a little while lower than the angels, you have crowned him with glory and honour, putting everything in subjection under his feet.

- *The Latin Vulgate, for liturgical use, translates:*

What is Man that you are mindful of him, or the Son of Man that you have visited him? You made him for a little while less than the angels, you crowned him with glory and honour: you set him over the works of your hands, you put all things under his feet.

- *ICEL, translating the Hebrew for modern liturgical use, offers:*

What is humankind that you remember them, the human race, that you care for them? You treat them like gods, dressing them in glory and splendour. You gave them charge of the earth, laying all things at their feet.

The point is that the contemporary ICEL translation has actually given a faithful translation of the Hebrew original, *ignoring* the fact that the Letter to the Hebrews had applied the text directly to Christ. The way in which Hebrews did this has been lost in the ICEL version, so to recite the ICEL translation in the wake of Hebrews 2 in the Lectionary (*Tuesday, 1st week of Ordinary Time, year 1*) would blunt the point the Lectionary wanted to make (thus the demand that the Lectionary present the text as in the Vulgate). The Vulgate translation remains faithful, not to the “clean” version of the original Psalm, but to the Letter to the Hebrews’ understanding of the Psalm. This is a good case where the liturgy has adopted a Scriptural (even if subsequent) interpretation of the Old Testament, and consecrated it in the Roman liturgical tradition. An even more influential case in point is Matthew’s quotation of Isaiah on the virgin conceiving, and bringing forth a Son (the Hebrew of Isaiah says *amah*, “the young woman”, and the Septuagint Greek says *parthenos*, “the Virgin”; so therefore does Greek Matthew.) It is true that Isaiah only predicted a birth to a young girl; but Matthew is also Scripture. Does this give his version equal weight as in “inspired” prophecy?

The return of ICEL to the “best practice” translation of the Psalm, with its inclusive language and its waiving of intervening understandings, has much to commend it. But these psalm-verses have been understood as Christological by Philippians 3:2, Ephesians 1:22, and 1 Corinthians 15:25, as well as by numerous Patristic commentaries.

Has the verse taken on a life of its own, passing through the Scriptures for a second time *with interpretation*, which we are obliged to respect in our understanding and treatment of it?

2. There are real problems in the readings we use, even in very strategic sites, and their settings in liturgical history.

- *The reading about the Sacrifice of Isaac (Gen 22) at the Easter Vigil.* How do people respond to this reading in an age obsessed by the correct treatment of the young, where social customs now found primitive sometimes coexist amid “enlightened” Western ways of life (e.g. child prostitution, arranged marriage, female circumcision, so-called ‘honour killings’)? Can a contemporary audience listen to this story with respect?
- *The Red Sea (Ex 14 -15) and its Canticle.* This central experience of the power of God entailed the slaughter of the Egyptians. Its recital is followed by a bloodthirsty hymn triumphantly exulting over their drowning and the drowning of their horses. How should such a reading be received in a world where a tide of hatred and violence which has afflicted all the world is still flowing from the war between Jew and Arab?
- How should preachers treat the readings from John 7, 8, and 12 which explore the rift between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, in ways that will not exacerbate the already problematic relations between Christians and Jews? Pope John ordered the extirpation from the Good Friday Prayers of the phrase *perfidious Jews*. Its removal had to wait until the mid-twentieth century of the Christian era.