

Today is indeed the Fifth Sunday of the Year, but it is also “Word of God Sunday”, a new celebration introduced into the Calendar last year by Pope Francis. It’s interesting that the pope chose to call this celebration “Word of God” Sunday, and not “Bible Sunday”, as most of the other churches do. I don’t think this is just a matter of semantics. The Bible is a book, or rather, a collection of books. That is what the word “bible” means. Those books contain the sacred Word of God, but the expression “Word of God” is, in Catholic tradition, greater and deeper.

St John tells us in his Gospel, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” You see, you cannot say, “In the beginning was the Bible” let alone that it is God. No, the Bible is to be venerated, to be honoured, but not worshipped. The Word of God, on the other hand, is Christ, who is truly God and Man, who is truly to be adored. “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ,” as Saint Jerome rightly admonishes us, but ultimately the scriptures are not an end but a means to an end: that end is our union with Jesus, who is both Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End.

That having been said, it is certainly true that we Catholics could improve our familiarity, and perhaps even our reverence, for the Holy Scriptures. It is sometimes said that Catholics don’t read the scriptures much, at least in comparison with protestants. Well, if we restrict the comparison to regular church-goers, it is probably true that the average protestant may be able to quote chapter and verse in a way that dazzles us, but it is not so much that Catholics don’t read the bible, but rather that they read it in a different way. Especially since the Second Vatican Council, we do read an awful lot of Scripture over the course of the three-year cycle of readings that we follow on Sundays. I read recently one researcher who looked at what proportion of a typical Sunday Mass was made up of direct texts from Scripture. He arrived at a figure of 30%. He then examined the service in his local evangelical protestant church and arrived at a figure closer to 5%.

What’s going on here? Well, a lot of the protestant service was preaching *about* scripture, rather than reading the text directly. And we would have to say that probably a lot of the scripture read in Catholic churches is forgotten pretty quickly because it isn’t preached on. The preaching is nearly always on the Gospel. The Gospels rightly have a special place: but they are, after all, four books out of 73 (46 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New.) We could also

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say that protestants tend to look at the Bible as something to study, whereas we use it more as a means of meditation and worship.

I think that the Pope, in initiating Word of God Sunday, is wanting us to make the most of both traditions. We have plenty to learn from the protestants' familiarity with the text of the Bible, and their devotion to its study. He is hoping for a renewal of study groups and the like among the faithful – the sort of thing we do each Lent, but perhaps on a bigger scale – without, of course, losing our tradition of using Scripture so fully in worship. In fact, many of the Protestant church in recent years have adopted the Catholic lectionary as a model for their own, so the learning, the enrichment, flows both ways.

We Dominicans, of course, have always been dedicated to preaching and this preaching was always based on scripture. St Dominic's favourite books were the Gospel of Matthew and the Letters of Paul, and he carried these in a little manuscript book wherever he went.

Blessed Humbert of Romans – the fourth successor to St Dominic, Master of the Order from 1254 to 1263 – wrote a fascinating treatise on preaching, which gives us an insight into the methods and subjects of the preachers of the thirteenth century. Some of the advice is very practical. He warns against going on for too long. “There are several consequences of excessive prolixity in preaching,” he writes. “The first is the emptying of the church.” He also speaks of the difficulty of preaching:

[How do we know it is difficult?] The first proof is found in the rarity of good preachers. In the early days of the Church a small number of Apostles, trained for their particular mission, was enough to convert the entire world; but present-day preachers, in spite of their number, make only mediocre gains. Why? Because the first preachers were equal to their mission, whereas those following in their footsteps are not. For, to judge the difficulty of an art, one need only count the number of workers engaged in it then note how few there are who really attain perfection in it.

In speaking of the knowledge a preacher must have, Humbert begins of course with the scriptures:

[The preacher's] knowledge should be very extensive. First of all, it should include a firm grasp of Holy Scripture, since in that there is substantially contained the doctrines that the preacher is bound to preach. “From the midst of the rocks they shall give forth their voices” (Ps. 103:12), wrote the Psalmist; or to bring out the point, they must draw from the Old and

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New Testaments as from an inexhaustible quarry, which they evidently cannot do if they do not have the requisite knowledge.

He goes on to talk about the other learning that the preacher must have, including the natural world of plants and animals and a knowledge of human history, but my point here really is that a insistence on a knowledge of scripture and a love of it was at the heart of the Church in the Middle Ages, despite what is sometimes asserted to the contrary.

In talking about the Word of God, I have neglected the scriptures we have just read. They are a great example of the diversity of scripture: that scripture has something to say to almost any human situation, any mood, any temptation, any concern, any celebration. Take the first from Job, a wonderful book that I am afraid we only touch on in the Sunday readings.

Lying in bed I wonder, 'When will it be day?'
Risen I think, 'How slowly evening comes!'
Restlessly I fret till twilight falls.

Yes, this is a text for us older folk, especially if we have fallen on hard times, if some of our dreams have been unfulfilled, and we come to realise that we have only one life to live in this world, and most of it has gone by. If that is you, I suggest you take up the book of Job and read on ... because there is more!

Our psalm, on the other hand, is full of hope – “Praise the Lord, who heals the broken hearted!” – while in the Gospel Jesus is the healer, the heavenly physician who heals bodies as a sign of the spiritual healing he brings to our souls.

Truly, the Word of God speaks to each of us if we open our ears – and our hearts.

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