

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

There is an emphasis on the word of God in today's readings. In ancient Hebrew society, the word of God was seen as a medium of communication from God to humans, which obviously involved an encounter between God and human beings. In Hebrew, *davar* means word, but it is a term that defies definition because it can refer to different means of communication. The word of God can be a spoken or written word; it can be a sentence or a whole speech or an entire book. It can be a song or a dance.

In the book of Deuteronomy, the Ten Commandments are called the ten words in Hebrew because they are ten items of God's communication to the people of Israel. Jesus is called the Word of God in John's gospel because Jesus is the supreme medium that communicates what we need to know about God. This is communicated to us by Jesus through his words and his whole ministry, his encounter with people, his healing, his reassurance, and his challenges to us to live the life of the spirit.

Isaiah 55:10-11 This short extract from the writings of the anonymous prophet known as Second Isaiah spells out the effectiveness of the word of God. The start of this chapter (Isaiah 55) has God speaking and urging the people to come and receive wine and milk at no cost. In a very commonsense way God is saying, 'Why spend money on what cannot fill your stomach? Why work for no return of labour? Come to me and I will give you all that you need for fullness of life.'

The realisation behind God's words in this chapter is that all creation exists because the word of God made it happen. The text reminds us of the refrain in the first chapter of Genesis, 'And God said, "let there be..." And it was so.' God's word is effective. It creates and sustains existence and it reveals.

In today's two verses God's word is compared to the rain and snow that fall and water the earth providing the necessary moisture for the germination of seed that produces food for humanity. The image here is of rain and water being heaven-sent to sustain human life. By comparison, the word of God also comes from heaven to guide human thought and activity in the direction of growth to wholeness and healthy relationship with God. The word of God will not return empty handed if we grow in the spirit, and our lives are governed by the values of Goodness itself.

Growth to wholeness demands change. Growth cannot happen in a static world.

Psalms 65 The responsorial psalm picks up the theme of the rain watering the earth that appears in the first reading. The psalm begins with a prayer of thanksgiving for the reality of God's presence on the earth and the verses that are part of today's reading acknowledge the gifts of nature that contribute to human life and sustenance. The original Hebrew of this psalm begins, 'You visited the earth and watered it,' which is an acknowledgement of God's presence in nature. The rest of this extract contains rich ecological statements.

What is missing from today's reading is the poet's awareness of conflict among nations that troubles the earth. There is an implicit prayer for peace here, the kind of *shalom* that comes with growth and maturity. In today's world, we are all puzzled at the barbarity of radical extremists who can convince themselves that the God of goodness is in favour of violence and killings in the name of religion. The psalmist, writing in the 600s B.C., sees the immaturity of war and violent disagreement among nations and insists that if people could stop and consider their place in the mystery of creation and the unfolding of nature they might be moved to gratitude and not to hostility. They might be willing to relish difference of race and culture in the world and appreciate that growth to wholeness demands change. Growth cannot happen in a static world.

Romans 8:18-23 In his letter to the Christian community in Rome, written around 58 A.D., Paul presents a message of hope and reassurance. This letter is the only one we have of Paul written to a community that he had not previously either founded or visited. He says in this letter that he plans to stop over in Rome on his way to Spain and visit with the community there. We know he never made it to Spain and his trip to Rome was not as he intended because he was taken under arrest for trial in Rome.

Today's reading from Romans presents some valuable conclusions that Paul has arrived at. The first English verb in today's extract has Paul saying, 'I think that...' and this is a pretty lame translation. The Greek verb Paul used means to conclude after careful rational deduction. He is not offering an opinion

but a firm conviction that, as a result of Christ's resurrection, we are eligible to be renewed physically and spiritually, and to ultimately share in the glory of God. Paul is saying that all creation is eagerly looking forward to the time when we will be fully children of God and we will be changed to the kind of existence enjoyed by the resurrected Jesus. The apostle here is not referring to some ethereal disembodied life in heaven but to a new kind of existence that, in Paul's language, amounts to the life of new creatures in a new earth.

Paul mentions the hope that all creation will one day be freed from being slaves to the decadence that has come about by human activity. In their weakness and self-centred attitudes humans have corrupted the innocence and beauty of the natural world through the lust for power and control. Societies have been torn apart by war, communities have been destroyed by racism and the inability to handle difference, and the planet has been polluted by the ravages of human greed, the decay of consumerism and the modern attitude toward disposable goods. Paul looks to the way the followers of Christ will live the life of the Spirit and thereby contribute to freeing creation from humanity's race to the bottom of the pit. In his letter to the Galatians he outlined the characteristics of those who live by the Spirit,

‘...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.’ (Galatians 5:22-23)

Just as a by-the-way, notice how happiness for so many people is tied to circumstance and may come and go according to different situations and conditions. True joy is tied to attitude and spirit and abides undisturbed through all kinds of storms and situations.

People opposed to the values of Jesus will not be comfortable with his teaching

Matthew 13:1-23 The gospel contains Jesus' story from the boat, the parable of the sower. It is not surprising to see Jesus creating agricultural scenarios to get his message across considering he is sensitive to rural Galilean audiences. Most Palestinian Jews in Jesus' day worked in agriculture and would relate to his anecdotes. We are all familiar with the parable and one of its allegorical explanations where the seed broadcast by the sower represents the word of God that is spread about and receives various degrees of acceptance by different human beings.

Possibly the most puzzling part of this account is the reply Jesus gives to his disciples when they ask why he speaks in parables. He makes the point that he is provoking people to think about what his parables might be saying. Those who are not open to his words will not understand what he is getting at and will not see the point. People whose values are opposed to those of Jesus will not be comfortable with his teaching because he is putting the responsibility on them to change their attitudes and lifestyle.

He is invading their comfort zone by expecting people to shape up, abandon their self-centred behaviour and live the life of the Spirit. This change of attitude and lifestyle is called *metanoia* in the language of the New Testament. It means a conversion of mind and heart, a turning from a life in opposition to the values put forward by Jesus to a life in harmony with them. At the end of his explanation Jesus is saying that living his way will bring contentment and fulfilment. His invitation, then, is to come and try it. Come and learn from me, as we heard last week, and you will find tranquility in your inmost being.



Selfishness is the great enemy of peace. Selfishness walks by itself and no one walks with it.

Blackfeather (Native American sage)



An Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotsman were asked about their tea-drinking habits.

‘I always stir my tea with my left hand,’ said the Englishman.

‘I always stir my tea with my right hand,’ said the Scotsman.

‘How about you?’ the Irishman was asked.

‘Oh me?’ said the Irishman, ‘I always use a spoon.’

Laurie Woods