

4th Sunday (C)

30th January 2022

‘Hearing the Word of God’

Jer 1: *Before I formed you in the womb I knew you*

Ps 71: *from my mother’s womb you have been my help*

1Cor 12–13: *Love is ...*

Lk 4: 21–30: *no prophet is ever accepted in his own country*

A very significant number of us — between 40 and 50, I think — have participated this past week in our ‘Week of Guided Prayer,’ a ‘Retreat in Daily Life.’ Participants have been blessed with the chance for daily spiritual direction with prayer guides for 30mins a day each weekday, helping us each make a ‘deep dive’ into our prayer life. It seems to have been much appreciated, a really helpful week for so many, a much-needed chance to pray more, and pray better.

For me, it helped navigate quite a complicated week, including visiting my Mum’s body for prayer along with my Dad, sister, and brother-in-law; also an overnight stay with my priests support group; the funeral of a 44-yr-old friend back in my previous parish, Hoddesdon; and the 2nd death anniversary of a friend’s mother back in my very first parish, Enfield. In the midst of so much, to be able to focus each day on a passage of Scripture, to relate the events of the day to the holy Word of God, provides a model for

anchoring our daily lives — sometimes in turmoil — to the Lord’s loving graces and blessings, consolations and encouragements. Certainly, through the week I had a whole variety of different reactions to the Scripture texts that I took to prayer. One text helped me to a deep thanksgiving for my mother’s life, and recognise the Christian values that she lived out; one text helped me to see that “blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted”; another text reminded me of my sins and failings, and yet how the forgiving Lord sees more than that — we are not the sum of our sins; and another helped me to acknowledge a deep desire for communion with the Lord, the need for joy in the Lord, living that out in the day to day. Lots and lots to think about, and lots to pray about.

In the Gospel passage of this Sunday, we return to Nazareth where we were last week, and we hear the follow-up to the events in the synagogue after Jesus had read from *Isaiah* 61 and claimed that the text, concerning the coming Messiah, was being fulfilled then and there, in their hearing! We might almost think of those locals at

Nazareth, fellow townsmen of Jesus, having the chance to be led in a reflection on that passage by no less a prayer guide than the Son of God Himself! Why is it that those verses of Isaiah provoke such a strong reaction in them, when interpreted by Jesus? It's a passage that they would have heard multiple times before; but this time they hear it with new ears. Our Lord brings their relationship to Scripture into the 'here and now,' as opposed to 'some vague time in the future, — so they are suddenly confronted with the prospect of the Messiah being already now in their very midst. Is it the supposed blasphemy that they react so violently to (Jesus's claim to be the Messiah)? Is it the fact that they want to keep Him to themselves, along with His miracles, and not have Him gadding off all around Galilee? Or is it specifically the guiding reference He makes to Elijah and Elisha also being 'prophets to the nations' and not just to Israel, the 'Chosen People'? Perhaps it is a combination of all three. Suddenly Scripture becomes for them a living reality, and not some archaic religious literature from centuries ago. The

Scripture comes alive when seen in the light of Jesus and with the gift of the Spirit. But in their case they choose to reject this new, living Scripture, the Word of God alive in their midst. What comes of that? Well, a violent premonition of what will actually happen later on, 3 yrs later, not in Nazareth but in Jerusalem: He is taken out of the city, taken to the brow of a hill, where His brutal death awaits. On this occasion, in Nazareth, he slips from their clutches, but the intimation is there — a brutal death does ultimately await Him.

What is our response to this episode, then? What brings us to listen to Scripture read, and enter into it with a prayerful heart, finding peace, challenge, forgiveness, acceptance, renewed joy, or mission ... rather than wanting to hustle our prayer guide out of the town up to the brow of the hill with deadly threats? (Thankfully, that is one of the advantages of having prayer guides on 'Zoom,' of course!)

As we imagine sitting in that synagogue, hearing Our Lord delivering this majestic text, we too want to marvel at the gracious words that came from His lips. But

not in the way that so much attention goes on in the world — the cult of celebrity — that is admiration, even adulation, one minute, and carping, criticism and condemnation the next ... That appears to be what happened to Jesus that day from His townsfolk. We instead need to sit still, listen deeply, and above all to invoke the Holy Spirit to enlighten us as we hear the words of Scripture, the words of Christ. We need to hear that Word as *God* speaking the Word — hearing in the Spirit the Word that was inspired by the Holy Spirit — and not judging it on a mundane human level. Often those words will console; sometimes they will perturb; sometimes they will challenge. But what we need to know is that ‘all Scripture speaks of Christ,’ because, as Vatican II says, “He is present in His word, for it is He Himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the Church.” So, when we hear or read the Scripture it is our beloved speaking ... and how attentively we (should) listen to one we love, savouring their every syllable.

So let’s make a conscious decision to do two things:

(i) to be consistently more attentive to the Liturgy of the Word in the Mass: to concentrate, to avoid distractions as much as possible when the Word is read, so as to take it in, listening out for phrases that the Holy Spirit draws us to savour and draw nourishment from;

(ii) to read from the Word of God, more often, in private: a simple way to do this is to take away with you the Mass sheet from Newman House each week; we have no need for these sheets after the day — I’d far rather you took them and re-read the readings in quiet, privately, for prayer some days later in the week — that’s a really good start. Read and re-read them as you would read the letter of one who deeply loves you: each word is a precious statement of God’s love for mankind, and for you individually. Today’s beautiful 2nd Reading, St Paul’s ‘Hymn to Love,’ to which I’ve paid no attention in this homily, would be a wonderful starting point: *Love does not come to an end*, and nor does God’s Holy Word: He speaks words of peace to His people with consistency and compassion. Let’s listen to Him, and know His love as our life’s guiding principle.