

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday (A)

19<sup>th</sup> February 2023

'Pope Benedict's teaching, v: *Verbum Domini*'

Lev 19: *you must not bear hatred for your brother in your heart*

Mt 5:38–48: *love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you.*

Cast your minds 3 yrs back. We were on the brink of the Covid-19 pandemic and all the death and disruption that would ensue, though we didn't know it. We were also, at that time, in the Catholic Church in this country, in the middle of the 'Year of the Word,' which sadly got rather swept away in the pandemic. That 'Year of the Word' 2019/20 was to commemorate through a renewed focus on the holy Word of God two anniversaries in 2020: the 1600<sup>th</sup> death anniversary of the outstanding Scripture scholar, St Jerome (340–420); and the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the masterly work by Pope Benedict on the 'Word of God,' the Apostolic Exhortation, *Verbum Domini* (2010). It's with an examination of that beautiful document that we will conclude our cycle of homilies on Pope Benedict's teaching from his 8-yr papacy 2005–13. Of the writings of Pope Benedict that we have looked over recent Sundays, it's the longest, but it is straightforward, marvellously organised, and truly magisterial. Well worth another look!

Papal writings on Scripture and more broadly the Word of God have a wonderful pedigree over the past 130 yrs, starting with Pope Leo XIII, and continuing with Benedict XV, Pius XII, and then Vatican II in the 'jewel in the crown' of that Ecumenical Council, the constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*. Pope Benedict consciously draws on these prior teachings as he considers this sacred topic. His work of 2010 followed on from, and wrote up the work of, the Synod of Bishops' meeting at the Vatican in 2008; and it perfectly complemented that other Apostolic Exhortation we thought about 2 wks ago on the Holy Eucharist. In fact, Pope Benedict chose to structure this work identically to the way that *Sacramentum Caritatis* was set out, *viz.*, considering the first the theology, then the liturgy, then the mission. So, in other words, in his treatment of the 'Word of God,' he treats first *Verbum Dei* (the 'Word of God'), the revelation of 'the God who Speaks'; then *Verbum in Ecclesia* (the 'Word in Church'), how we proclaim and listen to the Word of God in the Church's celebrations and ceremonies; and then

*Verbum Mundo* (the ‘Word to the World’), how the Word of God has also to be proclaimed outside the Church, to the world, how it’s not a Word to be held on to as a secret.

Here’s how the Exhortation, *Verbum Domini*, begins:

**1.** “The Word of the Lord abides for ever. This word is the Gospel which was preached to you.” With this assertion from the First Letter of Saint Peter, which takes up the words of the Prophet Isaiah, we find ourselves before the mystery of God, who has made Himself known through the gift of His word. This word, which abides for ever, entered into time. God spoke His eternal Word humanly; His Word “became flesh.” This is the good news. This is the proclamation which has come down the centuries to us today.

With these words, Pope Benedict sets the scene for his initial reflections on divine revelation, the fact that the Word of God is not initially the words of Scripture, but is the Word uttered by God, first in the divine *Λογος*, the eternal creative Word; then in Creation, in the ‘Book of Nature’; then in Revelation to Israel by Patriarchs and Prophets; then in the Word-made-flesh Himself, the Saviour, His entire self-revelation; and then, and only then, in the words of the Apostles preached and committed to writing, the sacred texts of the New Testament. The ‘Word

of God,’ then, is not a narrow term confined to the written texts of Scripture, but is a living Tradition begun by God’s own saving utterances, and treasured, transmitted, and taught by His people, His Church. In a very clear and very important passage, Pope Benedict states:

While in the Church we greatly venerate the Sacred Scriptures, the Christian faith is not a “religion of the book”: Christianity is the “religion of the Word of God”, not of “a written and mute word, but of the incarnate and living Word.” Consequently the Scripture is to be proclaimed, heard, read, received and experienced as the Word of God, in the stream of the Apostolic Tradition from which it is inseparable. (n. 7)

Our faith, in other words, is *not founded* on the words of the Bible; it is *founded* first and foremost on the divine person of the Word of God, who then “was made flesh and dwelt amongst us.” Expressing this in more figurative language, quoting an Epiphany homily of his own, Pope Benedict describes how Christ is the centre of all divine revelation — the *Λογος* who creates and who saves:

It is important to stress the unity of the divine plan in the incarnate Word ... We can contemplate the profound unity in Christ between creation, the new creation and all salvation history. To use an example, we can compare the cosmos to

a “book” — Galileo himself used this example — and consider it as “the work of an author who expresses Himself through the ‘symphony’ of creation. In this symphony one finds, at a certain point, what would be called in musical terms a ‘solo’, a theme entrusted to a single instrument or voice which is so important that the meaning of the entire work depends on it. This ‘solo’ is Jesus. ... The Son of Man recapitulates in Himself earth and heaven, creation and the Creator, flesh and Spirit. He is the centre of the cosmos and of history, for in Him converge without confusion the author and his work.” (n. 13)

But we also have to contemplate the role of the Holy Spirit in revelation, in communicating God’s Word to us, and Pope Benedict goes to some lengths to stress that the Son and the Spirit act in unison to bring this about — the Holy Spirit is active in this loving movement of God towards us:

The word of God is thus expressed in human words thanks to the working of the Holy Spirit. ... The same Spirit who acts in the incarnation of the Word in the womb of the Virgin Mary is the Spirit who guides Jesus throughout his mission and is promised to the disciples. The same Spirit who spoke through the prophets sustains and inspires the Church in her task of proclaiming the Word of God and in the preaching of the Apostles; finally, it is this Spirit who inspires the authors of sacred Scripture. (n. 15)

This, then, shows that the guidance and indwelling of the ever-present Spirit is the unifying factor that connects the Word given by God, to the ‘Word of God’ lived as the

Church’s Tradition (community), to the ‘Word of God’ written down in the Scriptures. And here we must then think about how the written Scriptures are truly inspired, i.e. are actually the ‘Word of God.’ The Church is quite clear on this:

**19.** A key concept for understanding the sacred text as the word of God in human words is certainly that of *inspiration*. Here too we can suggest an analogy: as the word of God became flesh by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, so sacred Scripture is born from the womb of the Church by the power of the same Spirit. Sacred Scripture is “the word of God set down in writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.” In this way one recognizes the full importance of the human author who wrote the inspired texts and, at the same time, God himself as the true author.

This also means that just as the sacred text was written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we should look to read it / hear it under that same inspiration. This is the whole basis of the *veneration* which we afford Scripture in the Mass and at so many other moments of liturgical prayer; and also in the prayerful way in which we should approach private meditating on Scripture. We need the Holy Spirit to help lift the divine Word off the page for us as a reader, just as the same Spirit helped put it down on

the page via their author. This reminds us that whilst the Word of God is the opening of a dialogue, it is not an equal partnership: its first utterance is by the 'God who Speaks'; but this Word is useless if not listened to, responded to, adhered to ... Our response in the Spirit is critical; our taking the Word seriously is life-changing:

**23.** In this dialogue with God we come to understand ourselves and we discover an answer to our heart's deepest questions. ... Thus it is decisive, from the pastoral standpoint, to present the Word of God in its capacity to enter into dialogue with the everyday problems which people face. ... Consequently, we need to make every effort to share the Word of God as an openness to our problems, a response to our questions, a broadening of our values and the fulfilment of our aspirations. The Church's pastoral activity needs to bring out clearly how God listens to our need and our plea for help.

Please God, some of you were helped by the recent 'Week of Guided Prayer' to do just that: to allow the Word to enter into your life in such a way that God would want; in other words, that He may speak His life-giving and consoling word into the heart of your life with all its needs. As the Pope says, in mentioning the *Book of Psalms*, which holds such a privileged place in the canon of Scripture:

"God gives us words to speak to him, to place our lives

before him, and thus to make life itself a path to God. In the Psalms we find expressed every possible human feeling set masterfully in the sight of God; joy and pain, distress and hope, fear and trepidation: here all find expression." (n. 24)

Maybe as we look ahead to Lent's beginning this week, on Ash Wednesday, it's a very good moment to be reminded of the important place that Scripture should hold in our daily prayer. Perhaps, if you have no idea where to begin, and have always struggled to read Scripture systematically, why not take, for example, the Gospel of St Matthew (as it's Year A), and simply take (a part of) a chapter a day? Prayerfully read, and invoking the Spirit to help us, the words of the Gospel, including the very words of Jesus Himself, serve to build up our faith and bring us closer to the Lord. Let me leave the final words to Pope Benedict as an inspiration for you this Lent:

The reading of the word of God sustains us on our journey of penance and conversion, enables us to deepen our sense of belonging to the Church, and helps us to grow in familiarity with God. As Saint Ambrose puts it, "When we take up the Sacred Scriptures in faith and read them with the Church, we walk once more with God in the Garden." (n. 87)