

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Although I've spoken to many people who are sick, suffering or grieving, each time I'm hoping I find the right words to say. The more I listen to them before I speak, the better I respond. But like any of you, I don't always know if these were the right words, and sometimes I remain silent because I can't figure out what to say.

Christians believe God always says the right word. Pope Francis has designated this Third Sunday in Ordinary Time as the Sunday of the Word of God. Fittingly, today's gospel recounts how Jesus began his public ministry by reading from the prophet Isaiah in the local synagogue, and we heard from Nehemiah about the faithful listening attentively to a reading from a rediscovered scroll of God's word.

In response, our cantor sang verses from Psalm 19. If you open that psalm in your bible, you'll see that it falls neatly into two parts depicting alternative ways that God reveals himself to us. The first part concerns creation; if you want to know who God is, look at the universe around us. The second part is about God's word; if you want to know who God is, turn to the bible.

In public prayer Catholic worship always includes proclamation from scripture, and in private prayer many Catholics use scripture for daily meditation. Some pray over the scripture readings assigned to Mass each day. Others follow bible podcasts. Some attend a scripture study. Some few just open the bible to page one, take a deep breath, and read through each page over months and years until they get to the end. Believers recognize that the bible contains the inspired words of God. Just as we may write down the right words we want to say to people we love, so God has written the right words for us, his beloved, to read.

Psalm 19 says as much with a series of synonyms for God's word: "The law of the Lord is perfect; it revives the soul. The decrees of the Lord are steadfast; they give wisdom to the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right; they gladden the heart. The command of the Lord is clear; it gives light to the eyes." The refrain we sang directly addresses God: "Your words, Lord, are Spirit and life." Those words do not come from Psalm 19 or anyplace else in the Old Testament. They are based on something Peter said to Jesus at a critical moment. In John's gospel, Jesus had just given the crowd his discourse on the bread of life, the same teaching on the eucharist we hold dear, and many of the people who heard it turned and walked away. Jesus despairingly asked the Twelve if they also wanted to leave, and Peter said, "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." When we make the bible part of our daily prayer, then we affirm that same belief. Many of us want to be rid of bad habits that squander our time. There's no better use of time than with the words of Spirit and life.

Psalm 19 closes with this prayer: "May the spoken words of my mouth, the thoughts of my heart, win favor in your sight, O Lord." Having praised the word of the Lord, having listened to God's word, we offer God this prayer: May our words win favor in God's sight. It's not always easy to break silence and say the right thing to people who suffer or to the God who made us. But if we listen before we speak, God's word will shape our words.