

28th Sunday – Year B – Danger of Riches

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark: (Mk. 10: 17-30)

Jesus was setting out on a journey when a man ran up, knelt before him and put this question to him, “Good master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good”? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: You must not kill; You must not commit adultery; You must not steal; You must not bring false witness: You must not defraud: Honour your father and mother.”

And he said to him. “Master, I have kept all these from my earliest days.”

Jesus looked steadily at him and loved him, and he said: “There is one thing you lack. Go and sell everything you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven: then come, follow me”

But his face fell at these words and he went away sad, for he was a man of great wealth.

Jesus looked round and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for those who have riches
to enter the kingdom of God!”

The disciples were astounded by these words, but Jesus insisted, “My children,” he said to them, “how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

They were more astonished than ever.

“In that case,” they said to one another, “who can be saved?”

Jesus gazed at them. “For men,” he said, “it is impossible, but not for God: because everything is possible for God.”

Peter took this up. “What about us’?” he asked him. “We have left everything and followed you.”

Jesus said, “I tell you solemnly, there is no one who has left house, brothers, sisters, father, children or land for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel, who will not be repaid a hundred times over, houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and land, -not without persecutions - now in this present time and, in the world to come, eternal life.”

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Normally, our Sunday explanation of the readings is centred on the Gospel, and rightly so, since the first and second readings are meant to introduce or to confirm the lesson which the Gospel conveys.

Today however, I wish to deal more at length with the content of the second reading taken from the letter to the Hebrews, because though brief, only two verses long, it

deals with a very important theme: The Word of God.

There we read: “The word of God is something alive and active: it cuts more incisively than any two-edged sword: it can seek out the place where soul is divided from spirit, or joints from marrow; it can pass judgement on secret emotions and thoughts. No created thing is hidden from him; everything is uncovered and stretched fully open to the eyes of the one to whom we must give account of ourselves.” (Heb. 4:12-13)

Let us consider the various parts of the text:

1. “The Word of God is as alive and active” today as it was when spoken for the first time:

~ Dead people do not speak. Whenever I speak, my words, in a certain sense, carry some of my life, my own breath. Yet, my word possesses no particular power; a servant may obey my command, but created things like the wind, the water and so on, will not.

~ God’s Word is quite different. The letter to the Hebrews has told us that “*God’s Word is alive and active*” (*Heb. 4: 12*), that is, it causes things to be; that what it says, does happen. Here you have some examples:

One day God said: “*let there be plants and birds and animals on the earth*”, and the earth was filled with all sorts of plants, numberless birds crossed the sky, animals by the thousands started roaming through the forests.

On an occasion Jesus said to a leper: “*Be cleansed!*” (*Mk. 1: 41*) and as he spoke, the signs of the disease vanished from the body of that man.

- On another day Jesus spoke to a girl who had just died: “*Little girl, get up*”, and instantly, the girl was alive and walking again. (*Mk. 5: 41*).

~ At his last meal on earth, the Last Supper, Jesus took some bread and said over it: “*This is my body.*” Similarly he took a cup containing wine and said: “*This is my blood*”: he gave both to the apostles for them to eat and drink. What the apostles ate and drank was no longer bread and wine but really Jesus’ own body and blood. (*Mk. 14: 22, 24*).

- This power of the Word of God is not just a thing of the past; unseen to our bodily eyes, God’s Word continues to work wonders also in our own days:

When a person is baptised “*in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*”, truly the Life in the Spirit is communicated to that person, thereby truly rendering him or her a child of God.

Or take for instance the Sacrament of Reconciliation: the moment a priest pronounces over a sincerely repentant person the words: “*I forgive you your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*”, that person’s sins are truly forgiven.

When at the celebration of the Eucharist, the priest repeats the words Jesus pronounced at the Last Supper, “*This is my Body*”, “*This is my Blood*”, they produce the same effect as when Jesus pronounced them: the bread is changed into

his body and the wine into his blood.

Also today, the Word of God is alive and active; only God knows the wonderful change millions of people have experienced down the centuries on listening to his Word.

When listened to, the Word of God becomes a seed in man's heart; it also serves as a mirror, and it acts like the judge of one's own conduct:

- God's Word is so powerful and so varied that it becomes many things to many people, to individuals and to communities:

a) *The Word of God is a seed:*

- Our Lord himself said so in the Gospel (Mk. 4: 1-9). When sown into the heart of man, it possesses tremendous germinating power.

You might have seen the seed of a tree just sprouted amidst rocks. It is something so tiny, that a child could uproot without effort.

But go after some time and see what has taken place: the seed had sank its roots into the crevices of the rock and has now grown into a young tree splitting the very rock. What would have taken you chisel and hammer to do, the once tiny plant has done without apparent effort.

The letter to the Hebrews is right when telling us that God's Word is *like a very sharp knife, like a double-edged sword* (Heb. 4:12); it carries within itself God's very power.

- Yet, in the parable of the sower, we are told that for all its power, much of the seed sown went lost, for want of hearts well-disposed to receive it. (Mk. 4: 13-20)

Unfortunately, men can prevent God's Word from yielding fruit within him.

Unfortunate the person who does so and equally unfortunate the Christian community which allows God's Word sown in it Sunday after Sunday to go wasted.

b) "The word of God cuts more incisively than any two-edged sword". That is, ***The Word of God acts like a judge:***

- A judge is a person who examines what someone has said or done, and declares that person either guilty or innocent.

On more than one occasion, on listening to God's Word, we might have felt uneasy; at the light of God's Word we realised to have gone against God's will. We felt like being in front of a judge and being convicted. The Word of God judges our words and actions, even our most secret feelings.

- In his letter, the apostle James puts this in another way: *he compares the Word of God to a mirror* (James 1: 23)

When in front of a mirror we see ourselves as we are; the mirror helps us discover whether our face or clothes are soiled or tidy.

Similarly, on listening to God's Word, the Spirit within us invites us to check if our life corresponds to what God tells us through his Word, what we should avoid and what we should do to remain faithful to Christ.

Unfortunately, more than once, as James says in his Letter, we put aside our conscience and try to forget whatever unpleasant we discovered at the mirror of God's Word by walking away from the mirror (James 1: 24). One day we might have to regret our foolishness.

c) *When listening to God's Word, Christ himself becomes our judge and our mirror:*

- We have said above that Jesus is present whenever the Word of God is read or explained. Indeed, he is the one who speaks to us through his Word.

- The letter to the Hebrews tells us that "*everything is uncovered and open to the eyes of the one to whom we must give an account of ourselves.*" (Heb. 4: 13)

- A blind man, on hearing someone speaking by his side, though unable to see the person speaking, clearly realises that he is being looked at.

At this very moment, Jesus' eyes are fixed on us, penetrating even the last recesses of our heart. We have no way to hide from him or to cover from his sight whatever is within us.

We are left with an only alternative. We have to choose one of the following

- to fall at his feet asking him pardon, and beg from him the light and the strength which we do not possess to act according to his word.
- or to run away from him and continue in our sinfulness.

We should be wise and follow Christ's advice manifested through his Word.

4. Riches are an obstacle to God's Word yielding fruit in us:

- The Gospel of today provides a clear example of how riches prove an unsurmountable obstacle in the salvation of many.

- We have a young man, 17-18 years of age, who felt attracted by Jesus. With great respect, Mark says, he prostrated himself at the feet of Jesus and asked him: "*Good master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*" (Mk. 10: 17).

His was a sincere enquiry; he calls Jesus "good"; he believed in Jesus' goodness.

On being told that he should keep the commandments, the man replied that he had been trying his best ever to do so. The young man was not boasting; he was a frank, sincere person, and Mark adds that "*Jesus looked steadily at the young man and loved him.*" (Mk. 10, 21)

There is no doubt that Jesus had some very clear plans ready for that young man; as a step to realise them he invited him to sell whatever he had and give the money to the poor. He promised him a far more precious treasure in exchange: "*then come, follow me, and you will have a treasure in heaven.*" (Mk. 10: 21)

- Reluctant to renounce his wealth the man did not accept Jesus' invitation, and Mark adds: "*he went away sad.*" (v. 22)

It could not be otherwise: the young man was walking away from the source of all genuine joy. The Gospel does not speak again about him; but you may be sure that his, must have been a very sad life.

How often he must have thought within himself: “*Had I done as the Master advised me to do, how different my life would have been!*”

No one can sincerely say that he is genuinely happy when he is in fact away from the Lord the source of all true happiness.

- Jesus too felt sad at the young man’s departure and his words of comment are a serious warning for everyone: “*How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God. (Mk. 10: 23)*

- *Rich or poor, we all must adopt the right attitude towards what we possess:*

Possessions are not bad in themselves; whatever we have, much or little, is God’s gift and God does not present us with anything bad.

It is not wealth that is bad, it is the greed and ambition which wealth brings along that renders wealth dangerous.

- Today’s first reading is taken from the book of Wisdom, known by a more complete name, “*The Wisdom of Solomon*” because for a long time it was thought to have been the work of King Solomon. In fact, the author makes it appear as if Solomon in person spoke throughout the book.

- On becoming a king, Solomon did not pray to God for wealth and power but for wisdom: *wisdom to discover God’s plans for him; wisdom and strength to carry out those plans. (1 Kings 3: 9)*

As long as he persevered in that attitude, humble and grateful to God, things went well with Solomon. When he started believing himself great on account of his wealth, he was carried away by his passions. (1 Kings ch. 11). Let us then remain humble, detached from material things and always giving glory to God for whatever we possess and use it in service of others.

Riches are an obstacle for accepting God’s Word; greed is a permanent danger both for the rich and poor. We ought to be always on guard against it.

Let us pray: Father in heaven, we thank you for having sent your Son Jesus into the world to announce the Good News; we thank you for sending him time and again to this your family gathered for worship. Help us to be faithful to his message, that we may find happiness in life and in eternity. We ask this through Christ our Lord. - Amen.