

HOMILY SUNDAY 03 – C (Homily 02)

“Spiritual Nourishment or Anoxeria?”

(Nehemiah 8:1-4a, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; 1 Cor 12:12-3-; Lk 1:1-4, 4:14-21)

Are you suffering from spiritual anorexia?

Nourish yourself and your family with God’s Word.

Some time back I had the occasion to visit a mental health center where I was introduced to a very attractive young lady who was suffering from anorexia. For some mysterious reason, she was starving herself, convinced that she was overweight, though she was not. Her obsession with not eating had brought her dangerously close to death many times. Apparently her case was so severe that even the medical people were losing patience with her. Her mother called me one day in a panic to tell me that a medical attendant had actually told her that if she did not improve they would put her in palliative care.

As disturbing as that scenario was, another very disturbing situation is what I would call the spiritual anoxeria exhibited by many of our Catholic faithful to this day, and that is a woeful ignorance of and lack of involvement with the Word of God.

Somehow, ever since the Reformation perhaps, many in the Church have been misinformed or have picked up negative attitudes towards the bible. One religious sister who taught in the north told me once that she actually believed at one point early in her career that the readings in church on Sunday were from some other book than the bible.

Another lady who had left the church brought a bible to visit her still Catholic sister and was told to leave because that was a Protestant book. Unfortunately, it seems that some older people in our archdiocese still have that attitude and are critical of their pastor for giving bibles to candidates for confirmation.

My own experience growing up was not that different. We had a large family bible at home, but it was never read or used except to enter information on the sacraments celebrated or to enjoy the pictures. It was not

until I entered novitiate that I learned to take the Word of God much more seriously.

Today's readings, taken seriously, can do much to redress this situation. The first reading from Nehemiah cannot help but touch the human heart. The Israelites had been allowed to return to their own land from exile, and for the first time in years, were able to publicly and liturgically celebrate a service of the Word – and celebrate they did, with drama, teaching, ritual and intense emotions. They were returning to their roots, the Word of God.

The gospel passage is a powerful account of Jesus fulfilling the very scriptures that he was reading. He was the messiah, the anointed one who came to bring new life to the world and freedom to all who were captive to sin and sinfulness. However, it seems that even in his day, people had very erroneous ideas about the scriptures, and their eyes were closed. They could not see in him, in his ordinariness, the mighty works of God fulfilling the promises made to the chosen people over the ages.

How unfortunate it is that in our own day, there is still the danger that we are no better off, that we are still misunderstanding or ignoring the power of God's Word, and missing out on the incredible peace, joy, healing and freedom that it is meant to bring us.

We are a people of the book, like our ancestors the Jews, and our contemporaries, the Muslims. However, we have been given the Holy Spirit, just like Jesus, to finally understand that our God is not aloof, not only almighty and distant from us, as is the case with these other religions. We believe that God in Jesus is actually the Word made flesh among us, intimately involved with us and able to journey with us through all our pain and oppression to eternal life with him here and now.

The bible is the book of the Church. It comes to the world from our Church. Over the centuries, papal documents have always encouraged Catholics to study, pray with and live the Word of God.

Scripture itself teaches us so much about scripture. In Acts 2:42, we see that the early followers of Jesus were dedicated to prayer, fellowship, the teachings of the apostles (scripture) and the breaking of bread (the Eucharist). They also appointed deacons to allow the Apostles to devote themselves to prayer and the service of the Word.

In 2 Tm 3:16-17, we are told by St. Paul himself that “all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”

Hebrews 4:12-13, reminds us that “the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

The psalm that we proclaimed today, Psalm 19, has a striking uniqueness to it: every strophe except one has one or more references to the Word of God. Today those references are: law, decrees, precepts, commandment and ordinances, reminding us of our need to make the Word of God central to our lives, and to appreciate its power to sustain and heal us.

Above all, in today’s gospel, we see Jesus, the Word of God, anointed to heal and liberate, to bring “Good News to the poor; proclaim release to captives; recovery of sight to the blind; to let the oppressed go free; to proclaim the Lord’s year of Favour.”

The Good News is that much is happening in the Church today to help the Word of God come alive, such as Bible Study groups, courses on scripture, lay formation programs that dwell on the Word, and well prepared lay readers.

Forms of praying that center on the Word are also being developed or revived. One such form is called *Lectio Divina*. This is a very ancient and revered way of praying involving four simple steps: *Lectio* or reading; *Meditatio* or meditation, *Oratio* or praying, and *Contemplatio*, or contemplation.

This very simple, yet effective and powerful way of praying, can transform individuals, families and parishes. It involves reading a passage of scripture slowly and prayerfully (*Lectio*). Then one thinks about the meaning of the passage, asking what it is saying to us in our lives today (*Metatio*). Thirdly, one then prays for the needs of the world or one’s own needs, using a few words from that passage (*Oratio*). Finally, one sets everything aside, trying not to think or feel anything but to contemplate the Word (*Contemplatio*).

The goal here is to simply be still and let God be God, trusting that God is doing whatever God wants to do in us to mould us in God's own likeness. At this point this method truly becomes a mature prayer in faith.

It is interesting to note that during the recent Synod of Bishops on the Word, even many bishops were being informed of and inspired by this way of praying. Hopefully they will be sharing this simple method of prayer with all the faithful of their dioceses.

The power of God's Word can surface in so many ways and places. One night I received a call from the distraught wife of Jim F, a local member of Alcoholics Anonymous. It seems that he was restless, depressed, anxious, unable to sleep, angry and unbearable to live with. He had been to see the doctors, who had given him both anti-depressants and sleeping pills, to no avail. Could he come to see me, she pleaded.

Though it was after midnight, I agreed and he came over. It turned out that although he had been a member of AA for thirteen years, he had never really worked the program. He went from Step 1 to Step 12, organizing Round-Ups and chairing meetings, but not really doing the Steps in between. In other words, he had become a classic Dry-Drunk.

I shared with him the passage in the scriptures where Jesus tell us that it is harder for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich or proud man to enter heaven. I explained that the needle was the name of a gate in Jerusalem that is so low that camels have to kneel to pass through it and suggested that it was time that he does the same by doing a sincere Step 5. He humbly agreed and proceeded to do a lifetime confession in which he was brutally honest and thoroughly cleaned house. Three hours later, Jim went away transformed, a free man, and talked about this experience for years at Round-Ups. The Word of God had broken him open to receive both forgiveness and healing.

The Eucharist that we celebrate today is first of all a banquet at the Table of the Word, and then at the Table of the Eucharist. Both tables are permeated with the Word of God.

May our celebration today not only nourish us, but also transform us and empower us to go out, bearers of the Good News to all that we meet.