

HOMILY LAC ST ANNE 2007
“Holding Fast to God’s Word”
(Isaiah 11:1-4a; Psalm 144; Rm 5:1-2, 5-8; Lk 8:4-15)

A young mother was having trouble keeping her son quiet in church, so she gave him a rosary to play with. That worked for a while until she saw him swinging the rosary around and saying, “Hang on Jesus, you’re going for a ride.”

We get just the opposite message from today’s readings: Hold fast to God’s Word and bear fruit, live it in the Spirit.

Many people today are eager to get a message from heaven, from an angel or from Mary. Today we are privileged beyond that. Jesus himself is giving us a message directly from him. It is the last line of the gospel: “Hold fast to God’s Word and bear fruit in it.”

Now, I have a question for you. How many of you in this shrine today have a bible of your own at home? I see a lot of hands up and that is encouraging. Now I have another question for you. How many of you brought your bible along with you to Lac St. Anne? I see a lot less hands, and that is perhaps a challenge for us. May I suggest that next year the first thing you pack to come on pilgrimage is your bible. That would be already a great start at living this message from Jesus – hold fast to his word and bear fruit in it.

Perhaps you are wondering if I brought my bible along. The answer is yes, I did, even though it is rather big and heavy, because I want to continue my study of scripture each morning. That is one way that I can hold fast to Jesus’ Word.

It wasn’t always that way in my life, however. I grew up in a Catholic family that went to church every Sunday. We had a big family bible at home, but we never used it. We just looked at the pictures once in a while. I never read a complete book from the bible until I went to university and had to read the book of Job, because it is part of the world’s greatest literature. And it wasn’t until I went to novitiate to begin my studies to become a missionary Oblate that I bought my own bible.

Isn’t that rather amazing, that the pre-Vatican II church that I grew up in did not encourage me to be immersed in God’s word? Looking back now I realize that we were spiritually malnourished, starving ourselves spiritually, as cradle Catholics.

Thank God things have changed greatly with the Second Vatican council. Though the importance of God’s Word was always there, now we are much more strongly encouraged to read and study the scriptures. Listen to what the document on revelation from the council has to say:

“This sacred Synod earnestly and specifically urges all the Christian faithful, especially religious, to learn by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures the ‘excelling knowledge of Jesus Christ’ (Phil 3:8) ‘For ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.’”

Therefore, they should gladly put themselves in touch with the sacred text itself, whether it be through the liturgy, rich in the divine word, or through devotional reading, or through instructions suitable for the purpose and other aids which, in our time, are commendably available everywhere, thanks to the approval and active support of the shepherds of the Church. And let them remember that prayer should accompany the reading of sacred Scripture, so that God and man may talk together; for ‘we speak to Him when we pray; we hear Him when we read the divine sayings.’” (#25, Dei Verbum, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation)

Bishop Richard Smith, who presided here on Sunday, shared an interesting comparison between the Word of God, and the books on Harry Potter. People lined up for days to buy a novel, a fantasy about Harry Potter, while in the scriptures we have the truth that will set us free. People lined up to buy a novel that influences some youth to dress and act differently, like the characters in the book. That is only an external manifestation, while the Word of God has the power to bring about an inner transformation, conversion, *metanoia*. People lined up to buy into a phenomenon that will not last. I believe this is the last book of the series that will simply be replaced by another fad. In fact, I don't even know if Harry lived or died in the book. The Word of God, on the other hand, will last forever and will take us into eternal life. The message, the choice for us is clear - hold fast to the Word of God and bear fruit in it, live it in the Spirit.

How can I hold fast to God's Word, you may be asking yourself? I would like to share with you a very simple method of praying with scripture that is almost as old as the church itself. It is called *Lectio Divina* (Holy Reading) and it is a way to hold fast to God's Word.

There are four stages to this *Lectio Divina*. In Latin, they are *lectio* (reading); *meditatio* (meditation); *oratio* (praying), and *contemplatio* (contemplation). Here's how it works. *Lectio*: pick a passage and read it prayerfully a few times. *Meditatio*: think about what God is saying to you through that passage. Apply it to your life. Read a commentary about that passage perhaps to deepen your understanding of it. *Oratio*: take a few moments to pray with that passage, using the words that strike you to pray for your needs and the needs of others, your family, your community, the world.

Finally, *Contemplatio*: set the bible aside and try not to think or feel anything. Just be there, soaking up God's love and trusting that the Word of God, which is alive and active and more powerful than a two edged sword, is transforming you from within. This takes a lot of faith, and is deep prayer, as well as a time of deep intimacy with our God. This is really listening in faith. Most of us are too busy telling God we want him to do, or wanting something sensational, to really listen. Yet the deepest language of God is silence – a silence that goes beyond words, a silent communion with the love of God that transforms. Contemplation is that faith-filled, transformative, loving listening to God's Word that is an intimate union with the Holy Trinity, our relational God.

We can use this *Lectio Divina* method to pray as individuals, or as families, or as groups. The former archbishop of Edmonton, Thomas Collins, did this in his cathedral for youth

especially, and continues to do this in his new diocese of Toronto. I find it is a good and effective way to pray everyday, and to grow spiritually – to hold fast to God’s Word and bear fruit in it.

It is this same concern that Jesus manifests in the gospel today, the parable of the Sower. He speaks of four different types of soil – a hard path; rocky soil; soil with thorns, and good soil. What kind of soil are we? Are we a hard path, with little or no faith? Perhaps we have come to Lac St Anne, but have yet to come to the shrine to pray. We are perhaps just hearing the noise of words over the loudspeaker, and not even really listening.

Perhaps we are rocky soil. We listen to the Word of God, but have no depth. God’s Word does not really penetrate, and does not last. That would be the people who take in a retreat, or a Cursillo, enjoy an emotional high for a few days or weeks, but in no time, are back to their old way of life. There is no lasting change. They are not living their fourth day.

Perhaps we are the soil with thorns. In that case, we have good intentions, come to church, and want to change, but are too busy with other things. Prayer and worship is at the bottom of our priorities. Our addictions, jobs, sports, selfish pursuits, leave us no time to pray. If we are too busy to pray, we are too busy, and need to re-order our priorities.

Hopefully, we are the good soil that Jesus praises. In that case, the Word of God connects with our lives, and brings about change, conversion, transformation. Hopefully, you have all had the opportunity to celebrate reconciliation here at Lac St. Anne. That is a privileged moment, a meeting with Jesus who is forgiveness, a celebration of genuine reconciliation with God, others and your self.

The theme of this year’s pilgrimage is confirmation and the Holy Spirit. In the end, it is the Holy Spirit that helps us hold fast to God’s Word and to bear fruit in it. It is the Holy Spirit that makes God a Trinity. The Father and the Son are only a couple. When a couple has their first child, then they speak about starting a family. It is the Holy Spirit that bonds the Father and the Son together and makes God a family, intimate relationship, a community, calling us into intimate relationship with them.

The Spirit is the giver of Gifts, as we are reminded in the first reading, and every time we celebrate confirmation. We are probably all familiar with those gifts of the Spirit – wisdom, knowledge, understanding, right judgment, courage, awe and reverence. Those gifts bear fruit within us of kindness, gentleness, self control, patience and especially love. The second reading reminds us that the Holy Spirit has poured out God’s love in us.

I want to share with you at this point some names of the Holy Spirit, names that give us an insight into the inner working of God in our lives, names that will help us hold fast to God’s Word and bear fruit in it.

The first name is Hebrew, from Genesis: *Ruah*, or the breath of God that hovered over the original creation. Say it with me, *ruah* – now you are speaking Hebrew. The second name

for the Spirit is Greek, *energia*. That means energy – the Holy Spirit is divine energy. Enthusiasm means “filled with the Spirit.”

A third name is also Greek, *pneuma*, or compressed air. We all arrived here in vehicles that have tires full of compressed air. It is compressed air that enables a plane to fly. I always marvel at that when I fly in a plane, large or small. God could use that power in our lives.

Another name is *dunamis*, or dynamite. God could use that kind of power. There are many people in the world who think that is how God operates. Listen to the news tonight and you will probably hear of a suicide bomber somewhere who has killed himself and scores of innocent people in the name of religion, holy war. They think that God is a God of power, control, violence, and justify their own use of violence that way. They do not understand, and need to be shown that there is another way.

That other way is the way of *exousia*. That is also a Greek word meaning power. Now, I have another question for you. Who is the most powerful person in this shrine right now? Here is a hint – it is not me, even if I happen to be a bishop.

No, the most powerful person in this shrine is the youngest baby here, and I see one in that row. Could you please hold your baby up for all of us to see? That is the most powerful person among us. A baby has the power to melt the hardest heart. We have all seen big burly grown men make the strangest noises when holding a child. That, my brothers and sisters, is the form of power that God loves best and uses the most – *exousia* - the power of a child, the power of powerlessness.

That is why Jesus was born among us as a defenseless child, and died on the cross stripped, tied down, nailed, totally powerless. He gave away all his power and control, to demonstrate that the greatest power of all, in the end, is the power of powerlessness, the power of a child.

That is not what a world addicted to power, prestige, possessions, domination and control wants to hear, or even to think about. That is why they killed Jesus. His way was too much for them, yet we know that in the end, it is resurrection power, the power to forgive, that is the greatest power of all. That is a power, however, that only the Word of God and the Holy Spirit can give us. It is that power I encourage all the confirmation candidates to pray for, and to use in their daily lives.

That is the power that God used in the resurrection of Jesus. When Jesus appeared to the apostles in the upper room, there was no trace of revenge or resentment in him, after having been tortured, mocked and crucified. There was only peace and joy. He even showed them his side to demonstrate that he was not avoiding his past – he was showing it to them.

What he was doing above all was showing the vivid proof of his new way, the way of forgiveness through the power of the Spirit. And he breathed on them and gave them that

same power to forgive that would make heaven happen here on earth. Whatever they forgave on earth was forgiven in heaven. That is amazing, astounding power that he has given to us, the Church, his Body here on earth, to help him initiate the kingdom of God right here and right now through forgiveness. Here is something to think about: God makes us holy through forgiveness. The more we are forgiven, and the more we are able to forgive, the holier we are.

Someone who understood this power, and used it, is Donna. Donna had been estranged from her abusive partner for years. He had taken a gun and a knife to her, and she had to escape for her own safety. One day he severely verbally abused her over the phone. Formerly, such an incident would have thrown her into total confusion. Her recent involvement with the church, however, had taught her to “communicate with love” based on the teaching of Jesus in Mt 18:15 (“If your brother wrongs you, go to him alone *and tell him how you feel*”) and Mt 5:44 (“Love your enemies”). So instead of acting out of anger, she wrote a letter to her ex-partner describing what he had said, and expressing her feelings of hurt and anger in a positive manner, with love. Then she went with her daughter to deliver the letter to him at a meeting he was attending.

His reaction upon reading the letter was to stand there, open mouthed and speechless, then he said simply “Okay” and returned to the meeting. Her daughter said with awe in her voice, “Mom.” She had never seen her mother relate to her dad in this way before. Returning home, Viola was filled with a mysterious joy. Sorting out her emotions afterwards with the help of her pastor, she realized what she had done - she had loved her enemy, had communicated with love, had actually forgiven him in the process and was free from anger and resentment.

With excitement, he pointed out that she was experiencing the signs that Jesus told the disciples would accompany them: “they will speak a new language, they will pick up snakes in their hands and be unharmed should they drink deadly poison.” (Mk 16:17-18)

Curious now, she asked for further explanation, which he provided: When she wrote the letter, she had taken up a deadly snake and it had not harmed her. When she delivered the letter to her ex-husband, she drank deadly poison and it did not hurt her. And when she expressed her hurt without revenge or name-calling, she had used the language of love so effectively that her daughter marveled at her. And in all of this she was healing the relationship between her daughter, her dad and herself. She was truly a disciple who was experiencing the reign of God and the power of the resurrection in her life.

The Eucharist that we celebrate now is a beautiful way to hold fast to God’s Word and bear fruit in it, through the Holy Spirit. We have just been nourished with the Word of God, and now we will receive the Body and Blood of Jesus, simple gifts of bread and wine transformed through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amazingly, we will be transformed by the power of that same spirit, into the Body of Christ, missioned to go out and bear fruit by serving a wounded world that struggles not so much to believe, but to live the humble way of Jesus that alone leads to new life, that can break the cycle of violence that plagues our world.

So, my brothers and sisters, let us hold fast to God's Word and bear fruit in it, live it in the Spirit.

I wanted to do a little ritual and have you all come up to place your hand on a bible and make a commitment, but that would take too long in the context of a pilgrimage mass and the blessing of the lake to follow. So let us just stand, place our hands in front of us on an imaginary bible, and repeat after me:

"I commit myself to praying with God's word and living it, so help me God."

May the Holy Spirit, help you understand and live the Word of God, and may God bless us all.