

I. THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR THE CHURCH'S PREACHING MINISTRY

JESUS, THE WORD OF GOD INCARNATE, AND THE PREACHING MISSION OF THE APOSTLES

The ultimate foundation for the Church's preaching ministry reaches to the opening chapters of Genesis where we learn that God, before the beginning of time, reveals himself through his creative and powerful Word. As Pope Benedict XVI notes in *Verbum Domini*, "The novelty of biblical revelation consists in the fact that God becomes known through the dialogue which he desires to have with us."¹⁵ Indeed our Trinitarian faith professes a God who in his very essence of infinite love is relational and self-communicating. The Father, from all eternity, is never silent. He, in the love of the Holy Spirit, eternally speaks his word, who is his co-equal Son.

In the love of the Holy Spirit, the Father creates everything through his Son. Thus the Scriptures present the Word of God as all-powerful, creating the universe that teems with life and beauty and, with human beings as the pinnacle of material creation, shapes them male and female in his own image and likeness. Impelled by love, God, through his Word, gives reality and meaning to all of creation. The poetic words of the prophet Isaiah capture this fundamental biblical conviction: "Just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to the one who sows . . . so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; my word shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it" (Is 55:10-11).¹⁶

¹⁵ *Verbum Domini*, no. 6.

¹⁶ Scripture translations are from the *Lectionary for Mass for Use in the Dioceses of the United States of America*, second typical edition © 2001, 1998, 1997, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, DC; otherwise, from the *New American Bible*, revised edition (NABRE).

As the Holy Father notes in *Verbum Domini*, the New Testament parallel to the reflection on God's creative Word in Genesis is found in the Prologue of John's Gospel. "In reality, the Word of God, through whom 'all things were made' (Jn 1:3) and who 'became flesh' (Jn 1:14), is the same Word who is 'in the beginning' (Jn 1:1)."¹⁷ In the light of this, Christian faith professes that the Word through whom the Father created the universe and guides the course of human history is the same Word who became flesh and dwelt among us. It is Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate, who saves the world through his Death and Resurrection and gives new life to the world by the outpouring of his Holy Spirit. As Pope Benedict XVI relates in *Verbum Domini*, "Now the word is not simply audible; not only does it have a *voice*, now the word has a *face*, one which we can see: that of Jesus of Nazareth."¹⁸

Therefore the Gospels consistently portray the divine power of Jesus' words. At the tomb of his friend, "he cried out in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out . . ." (Jn 11:43-44). Kneeling next to a young child who had died, he said, "'Little girl, I say to you, arise!' The girl, a child of twelve, arose immediately and walked around" (Mk 5:41-42). With his frightened disciples in a boat during a storm on the Sea of Galilee, he "rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Quiet! Be still!' The wind ceased and there was great calm" (Mk 4:39). Precisely because he is the Divine Word, what Jesus speaks comes to be.

This mission of proclaiming the Word was entrusted to the Apostles in the wake of the Resurrection. Through the gift of the Spirit lavished on the Church at Pentecost, the Apostles immediately began to proclaim the Gospel to the crowds present in Jerusalem (Acts 2:1-4). That dynamic and urgent mission of proclamation would continue as the Spirit impelled the Apostles and other missionaries to carry the message of the Risen Christ to the world.

Even so, there is a difference in kind between the preaching of Jesus and the preaching of the Apostles. Jesus, though bearing testimony to the Father, also bears testimony to himself.¹⁹ The Apostles, for their part, bear testimony

¹⁷ *Verbum Domini*, no. 6.

¹⁸ *Verbum Domini*, no. 12.

¹⁹ See Lk 4:21; Jn 3:11; 5:31-47; 8:14-18; 10:25; 15:26; 1 Tm 6:13; 1 Jn 5:7-8.

not to themselves but to Jesus. He indeed becomes the principal content of their preaching. Beginning with the preaching ascribed to Peter in the Acts of the Apostles, the texts of the Old Testament are referred to Jesus, to his Death and Resurrection. Ultimately the Lord's Paschal Mystery becomes the basis of all preaching.

That this kind of preaching begins on Pentecost is no accident. Christian preaching derives from the Risen Lord and finds its voice and force through the gift of the Holy Spirit. As Paul himself affirmed, "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 12:3). And further, "God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, 'Abba, Father!'" (Gal 4:6). This defines the preacher's task: enabling the whole community and each individual believer to draw on the power of the Holy Spirit and to say with one's whole being, "Jesus is Lord," and to cry out to God, "Abba, Father!" To preach Christ is ultimately to preach "the mystery of God," to preach the one "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2:2-3).

THE MISSION OF JESUS AS PREACHER OF THE WORD

We can think of ourselves as apprentices to Jesus the Master and so draw inspiration and learning about preaching from the example of Jesus himself as presented in the Gospels. Using the technique of *lectio divina*, which Pope Benedict XVI has recommended to all believers, we are able to absorb more deeply the breathtaking beauty and power of the Scriptures.²⁰ This venerable method of approaching the Scriptures, the pope observes, begins with a prayerful reading of the biblical text, then a meditation on its message, followed by a prayerful response on our part concerning what the Lord may ask of us through this biblical passage, and finally, contemplation of what conversion of heart and mind will be necessary to bring the message of the word to action in our lives and those of others. It is that movement from prayerful attentiveness to the word to reflection on its meaning and to proclamation of

²⁰ See *Verbum Domini*, nos. 86-87.

the message in speech and action that undergirds the preaching ministry itself and provides the logic of this statement.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD AS THE KEYNOTE OF JESUS' PREACHING MISSION

The key motif of Jesus' preaching in the Synoptic Gospels is his announcement of the coming Reign of God: "After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: 'This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel'" (Mk 1:14-15). Jesus' words are a dramatic summons to attention and response. The moment that the people of Israel had longed for was about to appear. Jesus wanted to wake his people from their spiritual slumber to hear the Good News of God's deliverance.

What is now at hand is the "Kingdom" or "Reign" of God. The Bible firmly proclaims that God alone is the Sovereign of Israel; human monarchs can only serve on God's behalf. The repeated failures of some of Israel's kings to administer God's justice, particularly to the poor and vulnerable, and the spiritual corruption of its political structures through the centuries led to a longing that God himself would ultimately come to liberate Israel at the end of the age and to transform her into a holy people, a people who would know the fullness of peace and justice, the fruits of the Covenant. God's "Reign" or "Kingdom" was a way of speaking of God's own redeeming presence and therefore would mean healing and forgiveness, true justice and lasting peace. Thus Jesus makes the Kingdom of God the keynote of his mission and teaches his disciples to pray to the Father: "Thy Kingdom come" (Mt 6:10).

Jesus himself is the embodiment of the Kingdom of God. Through his words of truth and forgiveness and his healing actions during his earthly ministry, Jesus already anticipated the fullness of the Kingdom of God that would be realized at the end of time. Origen of Alexandria called Jesus himself the *autobasilea*, the "Kingdom in person."²¹ Jesus, the Incarnate Son of God, is the realization of the deepest hopes of Israel: the perfection of the covenant,

21 In Origen's commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, *Patrologia Graeca* XIII (1862), p. 1197. See also the words of St. Ambrose, "Where Christ is, there is his kingdom," quoted in the CCC, no. 1025.

the temple par excellence, the supreme prophetic Word, and the meeting of the faithful God and obedient Israel. It is this dramatic Good News that Jesus announces at the very beginning of his mission in Galilee.

All effective homilies have this sense of urgency and freshness, revealing the startling beauty and promise of the Kingdom of God and of Jesus who embodies it and brings it to reality through his Death and Resurrection. The message of the Gospel is truly a matter of “life and death” for us; there is nothing routine or trivial about it. If a homilist conveys merely some example of proverbial wisdom or good manners, or only some insight gained from his personal experience, he may have spoken accurately and even helpfully, but he has not yet spoken the Gospel, which ultimately must focus on the person of Jesus and the dynamic power of his mission to the world.

Since the Kingdom of God is at hand, the only proper response is a radical change of heart: “Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1:15). The Greek word that lies behind “repent” here is *metanoiete*, which literally means a “change of mind” or “change of perspective.” Jesus invites his first hearers to turn from sin, to change their attitude, their entire manner of living, and to now see reality in the light of the Gospel, the Good News of God. This is why every effective homily is a summons to conversion. The announcement of the Kingdom through the words and examples of the homily, if it is clear and compelling, inevitably leads the hearer to a desire to be changed.

The need for repentance does not mean that homilies should simply berate the people for their failures. Such an approach is not usually effective, for concentrating on our sinfulness, unaccompanied by the assurance of grace, usually produces either resentment or discouragement. Preaching the Gospel entails challenge but also encouragement, consolation, support, and compassion. For this reason many teachers of homiletics warn, quite legitimately, against “moralizing” homilies, which harp excessively or exclusively on sin and its dangers. But when the offer of grace is also clear and presented with pastoral sensitivity, the recipient of that grace wants to change and wants to know what the new life in Christ looks like concretely. We think of the people’s heartfelt response to Peter after his Pentecost discourse: “What are we to do, my brothers?” (Acts 2:37).