



The Holy See

SUNDAY OF THE WORD OF GOD

HOLY MASS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

St. Peter's Basilica

Third Sunday of Ordinary Time, 21 January 2024

[Multimedia]

We have just heard that Jesus said to them: “Come, follow me... Immediately they left their nets and followed him” (*Mk 1:17-18*). The word of God has immense power, as we heard in the first reading: “The word of God came to Jonah, saying: ‘Get up, go to Nineveh... and preach to them... So Jonah set out and went... according to the word of the Lord (*Jon 3:1-3*). The word of God unleashes the power of the Holy Spirit, a power that draws people to God, like those young fishermen who were struck by Jesus’ words, and sends others, like Jonah, towards those distant from the Lord. The word *draws us to God and sends us to others*. It draws us to God and sends us to others: that is how it works. It does not leave us self-absorbed, but expands hearts, changes courses, overturns habits, opens up new scenarios and discloses unthought-of horizons.

Brothers and sisters, that is what the word of God wants to do in each of us. As with the first disciples who, upon hearing the words of Jesus, left their nets and set out on a stupendous adventure, so too, on the shores of our life, beside the boats of our families and the nets of our daily occupations, that word *makes us hear the call* of Jesus. It calls us to set out with him for the sake of others. The word *makes us missionaries*, God’s messengers and witnesses to a world drowning in words, yet thirsting for the very word it so often ignores. The Church lives from this dynamic: called by Christ and drawn to him, she is sent into the world to bear witness to him. This is the dynamic within the Church.

We cannot do without God's word and its quiet and unassuming power that, as if in a personal dialogue, touches the heart, impresses itself on the soul and renews it with the peace of Jesus, which makes us, in turn, concerned for others. If we look at the friends of God, the witnesses to the Gospel throughout history and the saints, we see that the word was decisive for each of them. We think of the first monk, Saint Anthony, who, struck by a passage of the Gospel while at Mass, left everything for the Lord. We think of Saint Augustine, whose life took a decisive turn when God's word brought healing to his heart. We think of Saint Therese of the Child Jesus, who discovered her vocation by reading the letters of Saint Paul. And we think too of the saint whose name I bear, Francis of Assisi, who, after praying, read in the Gospel that Jesus sent his disciples to preach and exclaimed: "That is what I want; that is what I ask, that is what I desire to do with all my heart!" (THOMAS OF CELANO, *Vita Prima*, IX, 22). Their lives were changed by the word of life, by the word of the Lord.

But I wonder: how is it that, for many of us, the same thing does not happen? We hear the word of God many times, yet it enters into one ear and goes out the other: why? Perhaps because, as those witnesses make clear, we need to stop being "deaf" to God's word. This is a risk for all of us: overwhelmed by a barrage of words, we let the word of God glide by us: we hear it, yet we fail to listen to it; we listen to it, yet we don't keep it; we keep it, yet we don't let it provoke us to change. More than anything, we read it but we don't pray with it, whereas "prayer ought to accompany the reading of sacred Scripture, so that it can become a dialogue between God and the reader" (*Dei Verbum*, 25). Let us not forget the two fundamental aspects of Christian prayer: listening to the word and worshipping the Lord. Let us make room for the prayerful reading of Jesus' words. Then we will have the same experience as those first disciples. To go back to today's Gospel, we see that two things happened after Jesus spoke: "they left their nets and followed him" (*Mk* 1:18). They left and they followed. Let us reflect briefly on these two things.

They left. What did they leave? Their boat and their nets, that is to say the life that they had been living until then. How often we struggle to leave behind our security, our routine, because these entangle us like fish in a net. Yet those who respond to the word experience healing from the snares of the past, because the living word gives new meaning to their lives and heals their wounded memory by grafting upon it the remembrance of God and his works for us. Scripture establishes us in goodness and reminds us who we truly are: children of God, saved and beloved. "The fragrant words of the Lord" (SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI, *Letter to the Faithful*) are like honey, bringing flavour to our lives and making us taste the sweetness of God. They nourish the soul, banish fear and overcome loneliness. Just as they led the disciples to leave behind the monotony of a life centred on boats and nets, so they renew our faith, purifying it, freeing it of dross and bringing it back to its origins, the pure wellspring of the Gospel. In recounting the wonderful things God has done for us, sacred Scripture releases a paralyzed faith and makes us savour anew the Christian life for what it truly is: a love story with the Lord.

The disciples thus *left* and then *followed*. In the footsteps of the Master, they moved forward. For

Christ's word not only liberates us from the burdens we bear, past and present; it also makes us mature in truth and in charity. It enlivens the heart, challenges it, purifies it from hypocrisy and fills it with hope. The Bible itself attests that the word is concrete and effective: "like the rain and the snow" for the soil (cf. *Is* 55:10-11), like a sharp sword that "lays bare the sentiments and thoughts of the heart" (*Heb* 4:12), and an imperishable seed (*1 Pet* 1:23) that, tiny and hidden, yet sprouts and bears fruit (cf. *Mt* 13). "Such is the force and power of the word of God: it imparts robustness to the faith of [the Church's] sons and daughters, providing food for the soul and a pure and unfailing fount of spiritual life" (*Dei Verbum*, 21).

Brothers and sisters, may the Sunday of the Word of God help us to return with joy to the sources of our faith, which is born of listening to Jesus, the living Word of God. May it help us, barraged by words *about* the Church, to rediscover the word of life that resounds *in* the Church! If not, we end up talking more about ourselves than about him, and so often we concentrate on our own thoughts and problems rather than on Christ and his word. Let us return to the sources, in order to offer to the world the living water for which it yearns and does not find, and while society and social media reflect the violence of words, let us draw closer to, and cultivate, the quiet word of God that brings salvation, that is gentle, that does not make a loud noise and that enters into our hearts.

Finally, let us ask ourselves a few questions. What room do I make for the word of God in the place where I live? Amid so many books, magazines, televisions and telephones, where is the Bible? In my room, do I have the Gospel within easy reach? Do I read it daily in order to be faithful to my path in life? Do I carry a little copy of the Gospels so that I can read it? I have often spoken about always having the Gospel with us, in our pockets and purses, on our telephones. If Christ is dearer to me than anything else, how can I leave him at home and not bring his word with me? And one last question: Have I read through at least one of the four Gospels? The Gospel is the book of life. It is simple and brief, yet many believers have never even read one of the Gospels from beginning to end.

Brothers and sisters, God, the Scripture tells us, is "the author of beauty" (*Wis* 13:3). Let us allow ourselves to be conquered by the beauty that the word of God brings into our lives.