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The FURROW

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Liam Tracey

Sunday of the
Word of God
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INTRODUCTION

In his apostolic letter of 30 September 2019, *Aperuit illis*, Pope Francis established that the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time is to be the *Sunday of the Word of God*. He already proposed something similar at the end of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy. It is a day to be devoted to the celebration, study and spreading of the Word of God. Pope Francis is clear from the very first paragraph of this letter that the relationship between the Risen Lord, a community of believers and sacred Scripture is *essential* to who we are as Christians. The Sunday assembly gathering to celebrate the Eucharist is the unique moment in the week where a community gathers in a particular place and when their communal identity is nourished by Word and Sacrament. An important advance in 20th century theological reflection is that every Sacramental celebration is founded and constructed upon the Word of God and that every proclamation of the Word of God is sacramental. While one might quibble with yet another Sunday being devoted to a particular theme, that is superimposed on the liturgical celebration, this Sunday of the Word of God is certainly understood in a different way. It is *not* a new feast! After all the Word of God is proclaimed at every Sunday Eucharist and one of the great blessings of the liturgical reform and renewal flowing from the Second Vatican Council is a greater appreciation of the foundational role of the Word of God in every liturgical celebration. The reform of the lectionary has led to much more scripture being proclaimed during out liturgical gatherings and a greater awareness of the role of the Word of God in the life of faith. This Sunday builds on the texts and prayers of the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time and is conscious that it comes just after the celebration of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. While we are not yet united around the table of the Eucharist, we do share on many Sundays of the year the same

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scriptural readings in our different Christian assemblies. The Pope urges us to strengthen our bonds with the Jewish people and to continue our prayer for Christian unity. This Sunday is a time when the community is called to give greater attention not just to the Word of God. It is *also* urged to reflect on how we honour that Word in our celebrations; is the Gospel book carried in procession, is it a well made book that shows forth its life giving content? Is it honoured with incense, do we sing during the Gospel procession? Are the readers who proclaim the Word formed in the art of proclamation and the knowledge of what they are announcing? Pope Francis suggests in his letter that this Sunday is an ideal time to reflect on these issues. For presiders it is also a call to reflect once again on their preaching of the Word of God. This Sunday might well be an ideal time to commission and bless those who serve the community as readers and initiate new ones to this essential ministry. If the parish community does not enthrone the Word of God every Sunday maybe today is an opportunity to start. Another way of nourishing the role of scripture is praying quietly together in a *Lectio Divina* style of prayer. Why not gather a group for an hour and pray these particular scriptural lections? In this short note, I would like to offer some pointers for the homily this Sunday, keeping in mind *both* the given celebration and the letter of the Pope.

POINTERS FOR THE HOMILY

Words, words, words, we are surrounded by them, there is a surplus of talk, from early morning till late at night, chat shows, phone in radio programmes, we can now even watch the radio on the television or on our computer screens, watching people talking. The power of words to create and sustain worlds and lives is ever before us. Words that can harm and damage lives and the sense of how people understand themselves, words that console and communicate, words of enduring and broken relationships. The human ability to speak and communicate is a constant wonder, its *power* and its *fragility* is ever before us. Words reflect the inner life of the person who spoke them.

How we speak is who we are. As Christians, we believe that all that is comes from the mouth of the One who spoke and all things were made. In the act of speaking creation happens, it is a blessing or a curse for those who speak and those who listen and hear. In listening, the voice is heard and recognition of the one who speaks may dawn. This *dynamic* of speaking, listening and knowing the one who speaks is the very dynamic of how God's word is addressed to the people of Israel. God speaks and calls a people;

they draw close to God in a gracious covenantal relationship. Their relationship endures and continues to this day.

Jesus also calls to himself a group of disciples in today's gospel account. He invites them to come and walk in his ways. Through their response, they set out on a path of discipleship leaving all behind them; it is a way that will lead some of his followers to martyrdom and others to betrayal: words of fidelity and words of treachery. The Scriptures nurture the path of the disciples in their following of Jesus and walking in his ways, by taking the word and allowing it to shape and mould our identity as Christians. The word proclaimed every Sunday in our Eucharistic celebration, the word heard in the very ordinary circumstances of our daily lives, the words that we speak every moment, let all of them be for us moments of salvation and gifts to others.

As ever the Word that is proclaimed in the midst of the celebrating assembly names that very community. Today we hear that we are the people who walk in darkness but we have received the gift of a great light. Communities are or have been in the past riven by dissension, at times perhaps even for very good reasons, but this can tear apart the fabric of discipleship, rather than being for Christ different groups and parties can multiply. Christ continues to call every disciple by name to come and walk with him. The Proclaimed Word is a Word not just in the past but a Word here and now, given to this liturgical assembly to *shape, challenge and sustain* their ongoing following of the Lord. Every time a Christian community gathers, it is making a bold statement about where they have come from, who they are and where they hope one day to be. The Scriptures nourish the boldness of the community, once more today we are urged to allow the Word of God to nourish us as both individuals and communities.

The Word of God. Most importantly, the reading done in *lectio* is motivated by a conviction about sacrality. As Christians we hold that the biblical text *contains* the Word of God (or, if it be a liturgical text or spiritual classic we are reading in *lectio*, this liturgical or spiritual text is *an echo or continuation* of the Word of God). It therefore needs to be attended to with the maximum care. Through these words as approached in the spirit of *lectio*, God himself seeks to speak to us.

– AIDAN NICHOLS, OP, *The Word Invites* (Herefordshire, England: Gracewing) p. 37.