



The Holy See

SUNDAY OF THE WORD OF GOD

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

St. Peter's Basilica

Sunday, 26 January 2020

[Multimédia]

“Jesus began to preach” (*Mt 4:17*). With these words, the evangelist Matthew introduces the ministry of Jesus. The One who is *the* Word of God has come to speak with us, in his own words and by his own life. On this first Sunday of the Word of God, let us go to the roots of his preaching, to the very source of the word of life. Today’s Gospel (*Mt 4:12-23*) helps us to know *how*, *where* and *to whom* Jesus began to preach.

1. *How* did he begin? With a very simple phrase: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (v. 17). This is the main message of all Jesus’ sermons: to tell us that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. What does this mean? The kingdom of heaven means the reign of God, that is, the way in which God reigns through his relationship with us. Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven is *at hand*, that God is near. Here is the novelty, the first message: God is not far from us. The One who dwells in heaven has come down to earth; he became man. He has torn down walls and shortened distances. We ourselves did not deserve this: he came down to meet us. Now this nearness of God to his people is one of the ways he has done things since the beginning, even of the Old Testament. He said to his people: “Imagine: what nation has its gods so near to it as I am near to you?” (cf. *Dt 4:7*). And this nearness became flesh in Jesus.

This is a joyful message: God came to visit us in person, by becoming man. He did not embrace our human condition out of duty, no, but out of love. For love, he took on our human nature, for one embraces what one loves. God took our human nature because he loves us and desires freely to give us the salvation that, alone and unaided, we cannot hope to attain. He wants to stay with us and give us the beauty of life, peace of heart, the joy of being forgiven and feeling loved.

We can now understand the direct demand that Jesus makes: “Repent”, in other words, “Change your life”. Change your life, for a new way of living has begun. The time when you lived for yourself is over; now is the time for living with and for God, with and for others, with and for love. Today Jesus speaks those same words to you: “Take heart, I am here with you, allow me to enter and your life will change”. Jesus knocks at the door. That is why the Lord gives you his word, so that you can receive it like a love letter he has written to you, to help you realize that he is at your side. His word consoles and encourages us. At the same time it challenges us, frees us from the bondage of our selfishness and summons us to conversion. Because his word has the power to change our lives and to lead us out of darkness into the light. This is the power of his word.

2. If we consider *where* Jesus started his preaching, we see that he began from the very places that were then thought to be “in darkness”. Both the first reading and the Gospel speak to us of people who “sat in the region and shadow of death”. They are the inhabitants of “the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, on the road by the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations” (*Mt* 4:15-16; cf. *Is* 8:23-9:1). Galilee of the nations, this region where Jesus began his preaching ministry, had been given this name because it was made up of people of different races and was home to a variety of peoples, languages and cultures. It was truly “on the road by the sea”, a crossroads. Fishermen, businessmen and foreigners all dwelt there. It was definitely not the place to find the religious purity of the chosen people. Yet Jesus started from there: not from the forecourt of the temple of Jerusalem, but from the opposite side of the country, from Galilee of the nations, from the border region. He started from a periphery.

Here there is a message for us: the word of salvation does not go looking for untouched, clean and safe places. Instead, it enters the complex and obscure places in our lives. Now, as then, God wants to visit the very places we think he will never go. Yet how often we are the ones who close the door, preferring to keep our confusion, our dark side and our duplicity hidden. We keep it locked up within, approaching the Lord with some rote prayers, wary lest his truth stir our hearts. And this is concealed hypocrisy. But as today’s Gospel tells us: “Jesus went about all Galilee preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity” (v. 23). He passed through *all* of that varied and complex region. In the same way, he is not afraid to explore the terrain of our hearts and to enter the roughest and most difficult corners of our lives. He knows that his mercy alone can heal us, his presence alone can transform us and his word alone can renew us. So let us open the winding paths of our hearts – those paths we have inside us that we do not wish to see or that we hide – to him, who walked “the road by the sea”; let us welcome into our hearts his word, which is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword... and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (*Heb* 4:12).

3. Finally, *to whom* did Jesus begin to speak? The Gospel says that, “as he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon who is called Peter and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men’” (*Mt* 4:18-19). The first people to be called were fishermen: not people carefully chosen for

their abilities or devout people at prayer in the temple, but ordinary working people.

Let us think about what Jesus said to them: I will make you fishers of men. He was speaking to fishermen, using the language they understood. Their lives changed on the spot. He called them where they were and as they were, in order to make them sharers in his mission. "Immediately they left their nets and followed him" (v. 20). Why *immediately*? Simply because they felt drawn. They did not hurry off because they had received an order, but because they were drawn by love. To follow Jesus, mere good works are not enough; we have to listen daily to his call. He, who alone knows us and who loves us fully, leads us to put out into the deep of life. Just as he did with the disciples who heard him.

That is why we need his word: so that we can hear, amid the thousands of other words in our daily lives, that one word that speaks to us not about things, but about life.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us make room inside ourselves for the word of God! Each day, let us read a verse or two of the Bible. Let us begin with the Gospel: let us keep it open on our table, carry it in our pocket or bag, read it on our cell phones, and allow it to inspire us daily. We will discover that God is close to us, that he dispels our darkness and, with great love, leads our lives into deep waters.