

CHARISMATIC CONFERENCE
WORD OF GOD:
WELLSPRING OF HOLINESS
Mary Immaculate College
28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

We should have no doubt about the power of God's word. God's first words in the Bible are the beginning and the foundation of the whole universe: "Let there be light; Let there be lights in the sky; let the waters under heaven come into a single mass and let the dry land appear; let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures and let the birds fly over the earth; let the earth produce vegetation, various kinds of seed bearing plants, fruit trees. And in each case we read that it was so and that God saw that it was good. No effort, no struggle, just an all powerful word. Finally God spoke on the sixth day "Let us create humankind in our image, according to our likeness". Then God saw everything that his word had made "and indeed it was very good". God, simply said, "Exist!" and we and the whole universe came into existence and continues to exist.

In the Genesis story we see that all powerful Word creating beings who themselves have the gift of words. And we see very quickly the implications of that. Our words, so small and insignificant by comparison, can offer praise and gratitude to God. But our words can often be biased, ill informed, dishonest, self-seeking or self-justifying. .

Words also enable us to communicate with each other. This too is a wonderful and dangerous gift. Vaclav Havel said in a famous speech: "Alongside words that electrify society with their freedom and truthfulness, we have words that mesmerise, deceive, inflame, madden, beguile, words that are harmful - even lethal,"¹

That voice of God which created all things resounds in every part of creation. That word of creation, as the Synod of Bishops on the Word of God said:

... makes creation similar to an immense page opened up before all of humanity, in which a message from the Creator can be read: "The heavens declare the glory of God" (Ps 19:2)²

That is the first way in which God's word is the wellspring of holiness. In creation we read the message of God about his glory and beauty. We can speak that word however inadequately, if we have listened to that message. We do that through what Pope John Paul called "a contemplative attitude", which sees life in its deeper meaning, grasps its utter gratuitousness, its beauty and its invitation to freedom and responsibility³. We accept that we are creatures and that the existence, the meaning and the purpose of our lives are God's gift. That is the beginning of holiness.

In the Old Testament we learn that God is not just a distant power. Although the second reading tells us that nothing escapes his gaze, we learn that God's gaze is full of love – he offers a wisdom to be loved more than gold or silver, health or beauty. God enters into a covenant relationship with his people. In the New Covenant we see that the Word of God has a human face and a human voice. "The Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us." The radiance which never sleeps, the God who dwells in unapproachable light, speaks with a human voice and lives a human life. In *Il Paradiso*, Dante describes the everlasting Light:

You dwell alone/ In yourself, know yourself alone, and, known/ And knowing, love and smile upon yourself!

And yet he finds that the very centre of that light

Within itself and in its colouring/ Seemed to be painted with our human likeness⁴

Some of the greatest philosophers of the past, who believed that a God or gods existed, nevertheless could not imagine that God could have any interest in us. We know a God who has spoken through his Son. More than that, he has spoken through his Son who suffered death on a cross for us. So the

¹ HAVEL, V., *A Word about Words*, Speech on the acceptance of the Peace Prize of the German Booksellers Association. July 25, 1989

² XII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Message to the People of God*, 1, 24 October 2008.

³ Cf. *Evangelium Vitae*, 83.

⁴ DANTE, *Il Paradiso* XXXIII, 124-126, 130-131, tr J.F. Cotter.

Word, through whom all things were made speaks words of human vulnerability: "Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass" (Mt 26:39), "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46).

The Word of God invites us to a holiness that does not neglect either side of that contrast.

"Therefore the real Jesus Christ is fragile and mortal flesh; he is history and humanity, but he is also glory, divinity, mystery: he who revealed God to us, the God no one has ever seen (cf. Jn 1:18). The Son of God continues to be so even in the dead body placed in the sepulchre and the resurrection is the living and clear proof of this fact"⁵.

This means that holiness has two sides to it. It must be adoration of the God who is the source of all things and all meaning. That means, as the Jesus makes clear to the rich young man, that God wants our willingness to offer him all that we have and are. At the Offertory of every Mass the priest prays "Lord God, we ask you to **receive us** and be pleased with the sacrifice we offer with humble and contrite hearts" Holiness must *also* lead to a willingness to look at human need and vulnerability, at suffering and injustice in order to understand them and *to do something about them*. Holiness is not just being in touch with the transcendent God; it is about being in touch with humanity and its suffering.

The human face and voice of God were at their most eloquent when they were weak and tortured and distorted in the cruelest of death agonies.

It is not just that these are two sides that have to be balanced. The truth is that they are meant to grow out of one another. St James says:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (James 2:14-17)

Holiness, which is about our openness to the infinite God, is also and inseparably about our openness to each other. If we try to follow one of these paths on its own we have not understood either of them. The holiness, the life, of the apostolic Church, was described in this way: "These remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers" (Acts 2:42). The reference to brotherhood is about *koinonia*, Christian love:

Authentic hearing is obeying and acting. It means making justice and love blossom in life. It is offering, in life and in society, a witness like the call of the prophets, which continuously united the word of God and life, faith and rectitude, worship and social commitment"⁶.

The four pillars of the early community are intertwined. Fidelity to the apostles' teaching, prayer, *koinonia* and the Eucharist each require the other three to be authentic. Love for the brothers and sisters finds its source and summit in the Eucharist, it calls for prayer with them and for them and for a living of the Word which unfolds its meaning not in spoken words but in actions and in fresh new ways to catch the imagination of a new generation.

We have to express the Word in a way that speaks to what Pope John Paul called a "new continent"⁷. Just as missionaries have always tried to learn the language of the country they work in, we adults have to learn the language in which a new generation expresses itself and exchanges ideas. That means finding images and stories that speak to others – as Jesus did. It means using the means we have -- not just radio and television, but even those areas where most of us feel lost. Even *names* like Blogging, Podcasting, Facebook, Bebo and Twitter may sound like a foreign language to some of us. Communicating the word is not just about expecting others to listen to us, but about us listening to them and with them to the Word of God. Communicating the Word is always a dialogue carried out in love, not with an underlying sense of superiority or with anger, but with a readiness to hear the Spirit blowing where he will.

The Word, the wellspring of holiness is not something to be received passively. It changes us and challenges us. As the word itself teaches us in the Epistle of James: "Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves" (James 1:22). We have heard the Word in this Mass; we now offer the whole of ourselves to continue to hear and do the Word.

⁵ *Message to the People of God*, 5.

⁶ *Message to the People of God*, 10

⁷ *Homily at Knock*, 30 September 1979