

**Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B
(Nov. 5, 2006)**

The Word of the Lord

How would you like to be able to hear God speak to you? I mean really speak to you. You can, you know. In fact you do hear God speak to you every Sunday when you come here to celebrate the Eucharist. For me it's one of *the* big reasons for coming to Church on Sunday – or whenever we come. We come here, don't we, to meet our living and loving God. We encounter the Lord. And part of that encounter is listening to the Word of the Lord, hearing God speak to us.

Just recall what has happened to us here in this celebration today. After I prayed the opening prayer. We all sat down and we listened. We listened to a passage from the Old Testament, from the Book of Deuteronomy. When it was finished the reader said, "The Word of the Lord," and we all answered, "Thanks be to God." Thanks be to God, because God has spoken to us. What else is the word of the Lord if it is not God speaking to us. After a few moments of silent reflection on what we had heard, we sang a responsorial psalm. This was our first response to the word of God in this our Eucharistic celebration. The psalms as you know I'm sure are prayers from the Hebrew Bible. They are prayers that Jesus himself knew very well and that he would recite daily. He learned them at his mother's knee, the way many of us learned to pray the Our Father, the Hail Mary, or other prayers like those. So when we respond and when we pray the psalms we are saying the very same prayers that Jesus said when he was a child, when he grew up and even as he was dying on the cross. I don't know about you, but it gives me a thrill to know that I am praying with Jesus' own prayers.

We then listened attentively once more to a second reading from the New Testament, usually from one of the letters of St. Paul, but from other New Testament writers as well, St. Peter, St. John, and so forth. And again what we hear is the word of the Lord. We stood and we sang "Alleluia." Do you know what Alleluia means? It means "Praise the Lord!" Praise the Lord. Why praise the Lord at this moment? Because we are about to listen

to the Gospel, the story of Jesus. So this is a very important moment. To emphasize the importance of the Gospel we carry the Book of the Gospels in procession, we enthrone it on our altar, and we carry it solemnly to the lectern and sometimes we even incense it as a sign of reverence and devotion. This is a holy book. It tells us about Jesus and helps us to know what he asks of us as we follow him.

Well, you know, one of the problems we have as we hear the readings from Scripture and try to see what they might mean to us today is that it is not always easy to understand them or to see their relevance to our lives. And so at this point after I said the Gospel of the Lord, and you responded Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ, you sat down. You sat down and then it was up to me to try to give some explanation of what you heard and to help us all understand a bit better what God is calling us to today and how we could carry with us from this church something of what we learned and make it work in our daily lives. That's what the homily is all about. I leave it up to you to decide how successful it might be. One thing is clear. The Church teaches that even in the homily somehow God is speaking to us. So if you are paying attention and if I am doing the job I am supposed to do, even now you should hear God speaking to you. That's pretty awesome, isn't it? And pretty challenging for me and the other priests as they preach to you.

Beyond that for me personally there is one other important purpose of the homily. That is to help you pray. After all the entire celebration is prayer, including the homily. We come here first of all as I said earlier to encounter the Lord. We hear God speaking to us in the readings, especially in the Gospel, but amazingly also in the homily. My feeling is that the homilist's most important role is to move you to pray, to help you to pray, and if it isn't too bold or presumptuous to say it, to make you want to pray.

That's why when the homily is finished, once again we sit in silence, to pray, to reflect, to ask God how we are being led at this moment, and to beg the grace and the strength to carry that out.

Then there is another response to God. Moved by this meeting with the Lord, by listening to the Word of God, we stand and profess our faith. We say "Yes" to those things God has revealed and the Church has proposed for our belief. The unusual thing about the Creed is that we don't

learn anything new when we profess it. We repeat the same Creed every Sunday and Holy Day. It becomes more like a hymn – a hymn of praise to our God who has worked such marvels for all of us. We are like Mary singing her Magnificat in Luke's Gospel: "God who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name." Full of confidence in God's love and care we turn to the Lord and present our petitions. It is an act not only of supplication but also of faith in the God whose voice we have heard and who assured us of his concern.

It might have seemed strange to spend a whole homily telling you what you probably already knew. But by dwelling for this brief time on the different parts of the Liturgy of the Word, we hope this Sunday to help you come to a deeper appreciation of this very important part of our Eucharistic celebration. We hope that when you sing Alleluia from now on it will be with more conviction since what else can we say when God speaks to us except, "Praise the Lord." Or that simpler, calmer, but just as heartfelt response, "Thanks be to God."