

The Twenty-eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B)

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| <i>First Reading</i> | Wisdom 7:7-11 |
| <i>Response</i> | Satisfy us in the morning with thy steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. |
| <i>Psalms</i> | Psalms 90:12-13, 14-15, 16-17 |
| <i>Second Reading</i> | Hebrews 4:12-13 |
| <i>Gospel Acclamation</i> | Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. |
| <i>Gospel</i> | Mark 10:17-30 or 10:17-27 |

The twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time for year B continues the Church’s journey through this wonderful epistle to the Hebrews. And here the Church gives us a brief but very significant passage from the fourth chapter of the letter to the Hebrews for the second reading for today. This is what the passage says:

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do.¹

What’s going on here in this particular passage? There are a number of points that are significant in order to understand what the author of Hebrews is saying here. So the first point is that in context, when he refers to the “word of God”, that expression is ambiguous — it can mean a couple different things.

So for example, when the Gospel of John talks about “the Word” at the very beginning of that Gospel:

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1)

...it uses the term *logos*. And there it's a reference to the Eternal Son, second person of the trinity, who is with God the Father for all eternity. That's one use — you might call that the Christological use of the word *logos* or “word”. But here in context, the author of Hebrews is using the expression *logos*. It's the same term, but to refer to Sacred Scripture and in particular to refer to the passages from the Old Testament that he's just quoted in the preceding verses of Hebrews 4.

So this short passage is a kind of reflection on the nature of Scripture as the Word of God, and not just its nature but its efficacy, it's power. So he tells us a few things about the character of Scripture, about the nature of the Word of God with these adjectives that he uses to describe it. So he says first that it is living. It's a living word; it's not a dead letter but a living word.

Second, he says it's active. And the Greek word here is interesting. It's *energēs*. We get the word “energize” or “energy” from that Greek term. So the image that he's using here to describe Scripture is that it's not merely a book, but as the Word of God, it's alive. It's active; it's energetic. It's effective.

Now, the third image he uses to describe it is that he compares it to a two-edged sword. The Greek word there, *machaira*, would have been familiar to first century readers, because it was the kind of sword that was used by Roman soldiers. So if you have a single-edged sword, that's very helpful. But a double-edged sword is even more deadly. It's even dangerous to use it, because as you swing it, you've got to be more careful with a double-edged sword than a single-edged sword that you don't hurt yourself. So it's the kind of weapon — it was an effective, deadly Roman weapon in the first century AD. And he uses this *machaira*, this image of a two-edged sword to describe what Scripture does, how the Word of God is living and active. So he says it's:

... sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow ...

It's kind of an interesting image. Do we normally think of Scripture as piercing us, as cutting us down to the very depths of our soul, much less using the imagery here of dividing joints and marrow?

So pause for a second here. Just as I'm reading this, it makes me think of my own experience growing up in the south. I grew up hunting with my family — a long tradition of hunting. And when you're out hunting in the woods, one of the things you have to do is clean the animal. And you'll realize very quickly the problems that will come if you've brought a dull knife rather than a sharp knife. If you're trying to actually pierce through the joints or pierce through the marrow of the bone, those are the most difficult parts of an animal to cut in two. If you've brought a dull knife, you're not going to be able to do it without a lot of effort, whereas a very sharp knife can make it easy to do that.

So he's describing here that Scripture is like an extremely sharp double-edged sword that can cut through joints. It can even cut through marrow, the bone itself, so that it pierces us right down to our very soul, all the way to the spirit of a human being.

So this is obviously a metaphor. It's an image, and it's not the only time this image of the sword is used for the Word of God in Sacred Scripture. For example, in the book of Revelation 1, there's a famous vision of the risen Christ, where the same imagery is used, again, metaphorically. Listen to this for just a second. This is when John has a vision of the risen Christ appearing to him as the Son of Man in glory. And he says in Revelation 1:12-13:

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle round his breast...

And he goes on to describe the apparel of the Son of Man, and if you skip down to verse 16, it says:

... in his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword ...

... same word, *machaira* ...

... and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

Now what does that mean? It doesn't mean that Jesus literally had a sword coming out of His mouth. It's an apocalyptic metaphor, an apocalyptic image for the prophetic word, for the power of the word of the Risen Christ, of the spoken word of Jesus. So this image isn't just for the Word of God in Scripture, it's also for the Word of God spoken by Christ Himself, because every word that He uttered is the living and active word of God. He is the word made flesh who speaks the word to us, and in this case is speaking it to John in this famous apocalyptic vision that John has in the book of Revelation.

So if you go back to Hebrews, what Hebrews is doing here is describing the efficacious power of Scripture to pierce us to the heart, and then as he says in the second verse:

... and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him...

... meaning God...

... no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do.

Now, if you haven't had the experience of going hunting and killing an animal and actually cleaning it and carving it open, you might not realize that he's continuing the metaphor here. What he's saying is just like we would use a sword or a knife to pierce through the joints and marrow of a beast, of an animal in order to expose what's inside of it, so too God uses His word to pierce us to our hearts, to our souls, and to our spirits ... so that our innards (so to speak), our interior dispositions of the heart, are laid bare, are brought open.

It reminds me — if you don't mind me telling this — when I was a little boy, my daddy would clean rabbits in the backyard. He would cut them open, and he would

show us the heart — he'd say, "Look, here's the heart — to kind of give us an idea of what the central organ was that kept the animal alive. Same thing with the deer. It's very striking. I can still remember seeing that as a boy, the interior life of that animal, the physical life being exposed.

Well, that's the image that Hebrews is using here. That's what Scripture does to us when we read it. It convicts us, but it also exposes us. There's a certain danger, in a sense, with the reading of Scripture. And it's not just the reading of Scripture too. It's also hearing the Word of God preached and hearing the Word of God proclaimed. It has the power to change us. It has the power to transform us. But it also has the power to expose our hearts when they're sinful, when they're not ordered toward God.

And we actually get this image again elsewhere in the New Testament, just as a kind of parallel to illuminate what Hebrews is saying here. If you go to the book of Acts, a similar image is used on the day of Pentecost. When Peter gives his first homily and he preaches to the people in Jerusalem who have gathered together because they have seen these signs that have taken place with the apostles, Peter gets up and he gives his first major sermon after he receives the gift of the Holy Spirit. And he accuses his audience of participating in the crucifixion of Christ: "You crucified the one who was Messiah." He says, Acts 2:36:

Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.

These are the same crowds that had gathered seven weeks before for the feast of Passover when Jesus was executed. And listen to how they respond. He says in verse 37:

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" And Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ...

And sure enough, that day three thousand of them do repent and are baptized and receive the grace of salvation. So again, this image of being cut to the heart — it's describing the prophetic power of the Word of God, but also its ability to affect a change of heart within the person who hears it or, more likely in the case of Hebrews, who's reading it in Scripture ... either way, although Scripture was often read aloud. That's the ordinary mode of proclamation. It has the power to transform the heart of the person who hears it with an open heart, who receives it with an open heart and allows it to really expose in this case (the case of Acts) the sin of the heart and the need for repentance.

And this is one reason, as we reflect on this, that — I think, at least — people are sometimes reluctant to read Scripture. There are all kinds of reasons, all kinds of excuses for not reading the Bible on a daily basis. People will say, "I'm too busy," "I have too many things to do." "It's too difficult to read Scripture." The Old Testament, for example, is very difficult to follow. The book of Revelation is a little terrifying. Hebrews is very theologically sophisticated. So you can always come up with different excuses for why you don't read Scripture, but one of the excuses (one of the reasons, I should say) that is sometimes lurking under the surface is that reading Scripture can be very convicting.

A lot of times Jesus — in particular in the Gospels — doesn't mince words. Like when He says:

I tell you, on the day of judgment men will render account for every careless word they utter... (Matthew 12:36)

... the Gospel of Matthew. "What you've said in secret will be proclaimed from the rooftops." Those are hard words, and they are convicting words. And they serve to, in a sense, cut open our hearts and expose what needs to be exposed so that we can change, so that we can be moved to repentance. And that's what the letter to the Hebrews here is giving us in this really beautiful passage about the power, the energy, and the efficacy of Scripture. And it's real simple. The reason Scripture has the power to do that is because it's not just a dead letter. It's not just a book. When we read Scripture, the *logos* of God, the Word of God, we're also encountering the *logos* of God that is the person of Christ. Every time we read Scripture with an

open heart, we're actually encountering the Word ... not in the same way as in the Eucharist — it's the Word made flesh in the Eucharist, the substantial presence of Christ — but in this case it's the Word inspired, the one who comes to us through the living Word of God that is active and sharper than any two-edged sword.

So in closing, I just want to ... a couple points from the living tradition on this. It's really interesting — if you look at the history of the Church Fathers and their reflections on the nature of Scripture as a living Word and not just a dead letter ... not just a book, but as a way in which we encounter the living and risen Christ. There are two quotes from two of my favorite writers, St. John Cassian — late 4th century Eastern Church Father, very familiar with the traditions of the desert monks of the desert Fathers — and then St. Gregory the Great, second pope to be called “the Great”, 6th century pope.

Both of them wrote paragraphs on how Scripture, because it's alive, actually can change and grow with the person reading it. So listen to this. This is from one of my all-time favorite books, St. John Cassian's *The Conferences* — just a little tiny book of his on his conferences with the desert fathers. This is what he says:

As our mind is increasingly renewed by this study...

... meaning, the study of Scripture ...

... the face of Scripture will also begin to be renewed, and the beauty of a more sacred understanding will somehow grow with the person making progress. For its form is also adapted to the capacity of human intelligence, and it will appear as earthly to carnal persons...

... meaning fleshly persons, people think according to terms of the world...

... and as divine spiritual persons...²

² John Cassian, *Conferences* 14.11.1; trans. Boniface Ramsey)

So pause there. That's in *Conferences* 14.11.1. So you may have noticed this. If you've been reading Scripture for a long time, you should have noticed this — that it grows with you... that every time you go back to it, you'll see something in it that you didn't see before. You'll understand something in it that you didn't understand before, even when you've read a text 10 times, 50 times, 100 times or more, you can always discover something new in it. And the reason is, it's because the text is alive. It's because the Word is living, and living things grow.

And in this case, there's a kind of mysterious organic development with what you're able to perceive in Scripture and with your own spiritual growth. So what John's describing here — he's letting the monks that are reading these conferences know that as they make spiritual progress, the Scripture is going to grow with them. They're going to be able to see things in it that they weren't able to see before. And likewise, at the early stages of their spiritual life, they're going to encounter things in Scripture that seem very carnal, very fleshly — even offensive — but they'll begin to understand the deeper spiritual meaning of those passages as they grow spiritually themselves.

Because the Holy Spirit is not only active in the Word, in the objective Scripture that it was inspired, it's also active in the person reading it. So the Spirit is allowing the person reading Scripture to see and to encounter aspects of the mystery of Christ that they weren't able to understand before.

And then again, St. Gregory the Great, in his *Homilies on Ezekiel*, famously wrote these words:

The more a saint progresses in Scripture, the more the same Scripture progresses in him...

I'll say that again:

The more a saint progresses in Scripture, the more the same Scripture progresses in him...

He continues:

Divine eloquence grows with the reader, for one understands it the more deeply as one's intention searches more deeply within it...³

That's Gregory the Great, *Homilies on Ezekiel* 1.7.8. And there's a quote similar to this. I think it's from his commentary on the book of Job, *Morals and Job*, where he compares the Gospel of John — if I'm not mistaken, or Scripture itself, I'm sorry I'm blurring on that — to a pool that a child can wade in or an ocean that a whale can swim in.

And his point there is that there's a kind of infinite and inexhaustible character to Scripture. Because it's the Word of God, it's infinite in its meaning and in its possibilities, but there's also a kind of divine condescension in Scripture that it can be adapted to a person, even if spiritually they're just an infant. They'll be able to see what they need to see in it, but its contents will grow with them as they grow in the spiritual life.

And this is one of the great things about studying the Word of God. And this beautiful, famous passage from Hebrews 4 is kind of the New Testament foundation for that idea that the Scripture isn't just a book. The Scripture is alive. The Scripture is a living Word of God, and because it's living and active and efficacious, the more we make progress in our spiritual growth, the more Scripture itself is going to grow with us.

³ Gregory the Great, *Homilies on Ezekiel* 1.7.8; trans. Duncan Robertson