

Father O'Connor's Homily for 29 August 2021
Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Sunday-B

Deuteronomy 4: 1-2, 6-8
James 1: 17-18, 21b-22, 27
Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

“I would rather see a sermon than hear one.” That is a very old line but it still speaks the truth. And we find that theme in our Scripture readings today.

Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah in today's Gospel when He says: “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” And Saint James tells us in today's second reading: “Humbly welcome the Word that has been planted in you and is able to save your souls. Be doers of the Word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves.”

And the question that follows for us today is not only, “Do I know the verses of the Bible, the Word of God, in my head?” But also, “Am I living them with my heart?”

I was talking with a group of people one time about preaching and what kind of things were helpful to them when they came to church. One person remarked: “What I want in a homily is a different way of looking at a Scripture passage that I think that I already know.”

There is value in that. I am always looking for fresh ways to explain the Scriptures. But is that enough: to stay in the realm of the intellectual? How does this information in our heads lead to a change in our hearts?

For Jesus says: “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” And Saint James adds: “Humbly welcome the Word that has been planted in you and is able to save your souls. Be doers of the Word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves.”

Someone else said: “I like to come to church and hear a good homily because it is kind of like going to the gas station. After all that has happened during the past week I come to church running on empty. And I say, ‘OK priest, OK readers, OK extraordinary ministers and musicians, ushers and greeters: Give it to me! Fill me up!’”

But then, when facing the coming week “all filled up,” to do what? To “be doers of the Word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves.”

The mark of an effective homily is not always measured within the church walls. Its real test is when we leave the church. Is the homily that we heard inside church now able to be seen in our lives?

We hear this in the last words of the Mass, in several forms, when we are dismissed by the priest:

“Go forth, the Mass is ended.” To do what?

To “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord.”

To “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.”

A person said to a priest after Mass, “What a motivating homily you preached today, Father.” And the priest replied, “Ah, thank you for the compliment. But its effectiveness still remains to be seen, doesn’t it?”

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When some of the great medieval cathedrals were built, like Notre Dame in Paris, most of the people of Europe were illiterate. Architects, artists and sculptors built those amazing cathedrals full of carvings and statues and stained-glass windows to tell the story of God through art. They knew that most of the population could never actually read the Bible, but they could “read” the story of God through what they saw in the church buildings.

Even though today the literacy level is very high, still, so many people will never read the Bible, or will only read it in part. We are the “living cathedrals” in our society. Others need to be able to “read” the story of God through what they see in our lives.

“I would rather see a sermon than hear one,” people may say. As disciples of Jesus, you and I are called to be the sermon that someone else might really need to see this week.