



Reflection for Word of God Sunday

by Fr Tom Elich, Editor, Liturgy News

For many decades, the Catholic Church in Australia has taken part in National Bible Sunday organised on the third Sunday in July by Bible Society Australia. It is good that this is an ecumenical event since all Christian Churches hold the Scriptures in common. It is always listed among the special commemorations in the official *Ordo*, but I suspect in recent times it has been largely ignored in many Catholic parishes.

Towards the end of 2019, Pope Francis instituted a Sunday of the Word of God. This was put down for the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time. He chose this date because it is close to when the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is celebrated in the northern hemisphere. This timing is quite impractical for Australia. The dates get mixed up with the final weeks of the summer holidays, the return to school and the celebration of Australia Day. This is why, many years ago, we moved the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity to the time between Ascension and Pentecost, which is generally in May.

This raised the question of our date for the Sunday of the Word of God. It cannot easily be near to the Christian unity week because all the Sundays are taken up with Easter, Pentecost and the solemnities which follow. Should it coincide with National Bible Sunday in July? In any case, the Australian bishops have decided to keep it close to Pope Francis' day, so it will be the first Sunday in February. This means we can avail ourselves of any resources which the Holy See may produce.

The Importance of the Word of God

In fact, there were two documents about Scripture released by the Holy See on 30 September – one in 2019 and the other in 2020. They mark the 1600th anniversary of the death of St Jerome, the great Scripture scholar who prepared the definitive translation of the Bible into Latin. The first document institutes the Sunday of the Word of God, intended to help people to grow in religious and intimate familiarity with the sacred Scriptures. The second gives an account of St Jerome, his scholarship, his faith and his "living and tender love" of the Word of God. Jerome is proposed as a model for inculturating the Gospel and discovering Christ for our time.

Most are no doubt familiar with the saying of Vatican II: "the Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures as she has venerated the Lord's body ... offering people the bread of life from the one table of the Word of God and the body of Christ (*Dei Verbum* 21)." In the same vein, the second document quotes St Jerome: "We are reading the sacred Scriptures. For me, the Gospel is the body of Christ; for me, the holy Scriptures are his teaching. And when he says: 'whoever does not eat my flesh and drink my blood' (Jn 6:53), even though these words can also be understood of the [eucharistic] Mystery, Christ's body and blood are really the word of Scripture, God's teaching."

Celebrate, Study, Disseminate the Word

The first Sunday in February is to be devoted to the celebration, study and dissemination of the Word of God. The document inaugurating this day, *Aperuit Illis*, offers a number of practical strategies (AI, 3).

Solemnity. To mark the day with a certain solemnity, a parish might choose to use special vestments, candles to accompany a procession of the Gospel and incense to venerate the Word.

Music. Hymns such as *God has Spoken by His Prophets* (sung to Beethoven's Ode to Joy) will help focus the attention of the assembly (*Catholic Worship Book II*, 497). Other suggestions include *A Trusting Psalm* (CWBII, 293) and *Praise to You, O Christ our Saviour* (CWBII, 587).

Enthronement. It is recommended that the sacred text be enthroned. Some ambos designed in the 1970s might have a shelf on the front for placing the open Book of the Gospels. This day would be a good opportunity to use it. It is not, however, generally recommended that ambos be designed in this way because the liturgical focus is on the proclamation and the hearing and not so much on the written text itself. The words on the page come alive when they are received. At the end of the Gospel, of course, the rubrics direct the priest to kiss the book because it is a sign of the living Christ who speaks to us. The enthronement can take place on this special day in the sanctuary by introducing a draped lectern for the purpose. It might be more suitable, however, to establish a chapel of the Word where a copy of the Scriptures is made available to people all year round. It may be left open at a text suitable for the feast or season. It may be appropriate to enthrone the Scriptures at the tabernacle to assist people in their prayer and meditation there.

Homily. A key part of the proclamation of the Word is the homily. For many of our faithful, in fact, this is the only opportunity they have to grasp the beauty of God's Word and to see it applied to their daily lives. Those of us who are preachers should not give long, pedantic homilies or wander off into unrelated topics (*AI*, 5).

Prayers. One or two intercessions in the Prayer of the Faithful should ask that the Word of God touch and transform the hearts of Christians. The Eucharistic Prayers for Use in Masses for Various Needs would be particularly appropriate. The first of these acknowledges that the Word of Christ's Gospel calls us to unity across every people, tongue and nation, and then asks that the Church be renewed by the light of the Gospel.

Commissioning Readers. This might be an ideal day to commission readers for the new year's roster. It could also be set aside as a training or retreat day for ministers of the Word.

Bible Study. Sunday of the Word of God would be a good opportunity to invite the parish community to take part in the Lenten reflection on the Sunday Scriptures, or other Bible study opportunities may be presented.

Gifts. Pastors, it is suggested, might find ways of giving a Bible or a part of it as a gift. The Ordinary Time cycle for Year B in 2021 follows the Gospel of Mark. This would be an appropriate gift for parishioners (it may be available inexpensively from Bible Society Australia).

Daily Prayer. The day presents an opportunity to encourage people to read, appreciate and pray daily with sacred Scripture, especially through the practice of *lectio divina*. Electronic resources are available to help with such a project and can be promoted.

Let us embrace Sunday of the Word of God to help us launch our new year with a deeper and richer encounter with the Risen Lord. And if it works well in February, why not do it again on the third Sunday in July?

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