



## **Third Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)**

### **Homily**

**Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB  
Archbishop of Perth**

**Sunday 23 January 2022  
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

As I mentioned at the beginning of Mass this morning, this third Sunday of the year following our celebration of the Christmas season has been designated by Pope Francis as the Sunday of the Word of God.

Focusing on the Word of God invites us to remember the important part which the Scriptures should play in our lives. There is a beautiful phrase in one of the Psalms which sums this up very well. *"Your word"* writes the psalmist, *"is a lamp for my steps and a light for my eyes"*. In the Jewish tradition this refers to what we call the Old Testament. The chosen people of Israel have always understood that the words of Scripture, and in a particular way the words of the first five books of the Bible, are inspired by God. We Christians believe exactly the same thing of all the books which form part of the Old Testament and of the gospels and the other New Testament writings as well. In them we find the inspired word of God given to us by God in order to be a lamp for our steps and a light for our path as we journey through life.

In our Catholic tradition the four Gospels hold a pre-eminent place. This is why we stand when the gospel is read during Mass. It is a sign of our deep reverence for the word of God. It is also why, on solemn occasions, we incense the book of the Gospels and why at the end of the gospel the Deacon or priest, or the Bishop if he is present, kiss the book of the gospel just as we kiss the altar at the beginning and end of Mass.

Our tradition highlights two important aspects of this idea of the Scriptures as inspired by God. The first idea was stressed very strongly at the time of the Second Vatican Council. The Council taught that the Scriptures are the Word of God in the words of human beings. What this means is that if we are to really understand the message in the Scriptures we must understand the particular way in which people in the first century expressed their ideas and their beliefs in writing. God made use of the skills and techniques of those who formed the Gospels and other writings in order to communicate his message to us. We can, therefore, be absolutely confident of the truth of the Scriptures as long as we understand the way in which that truth is being communicated. Not everything should be taken literally and everything should be understood within its context. For example, when Jesus says at one stage that if your eye causes you to sin you should pluck



it out and throw it away, we know instinctively that this is not to be taken literally. It is, however, to be taken seriously.

This leads to the second central idea about the Scriptures in our Catholic tradition. They have been given by God to the Church as the community of the disciples of Jesus. It is within that community that they are able to be properly understood. The scripture scholars tell us, for example, that the first of the four Gospels to be finally written down in its present form was probably done so around 20 to 30 years after the death of Jesus while the last of the four to be completed, the Gospel of John, may not have reached its final form until as many as 70 years after the death of Jesus. The process of shaping the four Gospels which took place over this rather long period of time was guided by the Holy Spirit. We believe, therefore, as the Second Vatican Council teaches, that the Scriptures “contain all those things and only those things which God intended to be for our salvation”.

This process is captured well in the opening words of this morning’s gospel reading where the writer acknowledges that many people have already told the story of Jesus in writing. Now he, in his gospel, intends to do the same in an ordered fashion so as to make clear how well founded the faith of the early community really is. Similarly, at the end of the Gospel of John the writer explains that there were many other things that Jesus said and did which have not been included in the gospel. Those that are included have been chosen in order to strengthen people’s faith.

The selection of some stories and the exclusion of others, and the different ordering in the accounts of Jesus’s life which we find in the four Gospels, are all at the service of the intention of the writers, inspired by God, to lead us, the readers, to a deeper faith.

As many of you would know there are more than four Gospels in existence. We have only four of them in the New Testament because the community of faith, through its leaders, determined under the guidance of the Holy Spirit which of the many gospels were true expressions of our Christian faith and which in one way or another were not. This highlights the role of the Church helping us to understand the true meaning of the Scriptures. This does not mean that we should not read the Scriptures privately and pray over them, or discuss them in small groups. Of course we must. How can they be lamp for our steps and a light for our path if we are not deeply familiar with them? But it is the faith of the Church which will help us avoid the traps which can come from an individualistic reading of the Scriptures.

After its important introduction today’s gospel passage jumps immediately to the scene of Jesus announcing the purpose of his mission. He borrows words from the prophet Isaiah, makes them his own, and then very solemnly announces, “this text is being fulfilled today even as you listen”. Jesus is claiming that in his very person the promises of God are being fulfilled. We might say, echoing St John’s gospel, that the words of God found in the Old Testament prophet Isaiah have come to fullness in Jesus who is in himself the Word of God. As that Gospel says “*the word (of God) became flesh and lived among us*”. Everything chosen by the writers of the four gospels



points to this amazing truth: that in Jesus God comes among us as one of us in order to unveil the great mystery of God's love, compassion and mercy.

In honouring the written Word of God today we are acknowledging that in this written word, proclaimed in the community of faith, we discover the truth about who Jesus really is. Because he is God among us we see in his humanity what we are all called to be and we also see made real and concrete for us in human form the face of the mercy of God.

Jesus is indeed our way, our truth and our life. May our lives together as members of his holy Church and lived in fidelity to his word keep us faithful to him and enable us to be signs and bearers of his love for others.