

## Homily: Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C) 2022

Where were you when you heard that John F. Kennedy had been shot? Everybody remembers that, don't they? Or, for those of us who are too young for JFK, we all remember where we were when we heard about the 9/11 attacks. When we hear of something that big, something world-changing, it makes its mark on us. And the same is true when something changes *our* world: when your future spouse proposed to you, for example. Surely every married person remembers that! I remember very distinctly where I was when I heard that the bishop had accepted me for seminary: I was in the garage, playing pool with my brother on an old pool table we had, when the phone went. It was Fr Paul Embery, at that time Vocations Director, on the phone, and he told me that I would be going to Ushaw. I can't remember who won the pool match, but I remember the event. I remember where I was when I heard. We remember hearing life-changing news.

Every Sunday we hear life-changing news. We listen to the Gospel, the 'Good News' of Jesus Christ. It's always good, because it is calling us to a loving union with God, a union which will ultimately be fulfilled in heaven. And it's always news: even when we have heard a Gospel passage a thousand times, God is speaking to us, anew, in this moment. Sometimes our familiarity stops us from hearing His voice. Today's readings contain some very familiar scenes for us. In the first reading, Ezra opens the book of God's Word, the Bible, and reads and instructs the people. They have just come back to Jerusalem after a long period of exile, and they listen attentively. And in the Gospel, we find Jesus at the synagogue in Nazareth, reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah then interpreting what He has read. Now, you might say, "But this isn't familiar to me... I don't know this scene all that well, and frankly I've can't remember hearing anything about Ezra before today." But it *is* a familiar scene, because it's something we do every week at Mass. The Word of God is read, then interpreted: readings and homily. What we do each Sunday – each day for those who can – has been a part of the life of God's people for thousands of years.

What effect does it have on me? What changes when I hear the Word of God? How do I respond? If we were to read on a few more lines in the Gospel, we would read that the people were "astonished" at Jesus' teaching. In today's first reading, they are moved to tears by what they hear – tears, perhaps, of repentance for their sins, or perhaps tears of joy at the beauty of God's Word. Either way, the people are moved by what they hear, and if it moves them, it changes them. They are moved: they are not standing still. But we can't be moved unless we are really hearing what God is saying, and we can't really hear unless we listen and we trust. Today we've heard the very opening words of St Luke's Gospel, and he's keen to reassure us that his text is reliable. He speaks about how carefully he has researched, speaking to eyewitnesses about the things that Jesus said and did. We trust the Gospel, because it is based on the memories of those who lived alongside Jesus; but we also trust it because it is the divinely inspired Word of God. If I trust that God is really speaking to me, I can listen and allow His Word to take effect in my life.

So, if I listen with faith, what might I hear? A word of encouragement, perhaps: the Lord "sets the downtrodden free", as we hear in today's Gospel. Or a word of reassurance: "Do

not be sad: the joy of the Lord is your stronghold”, as in the first reading. Or a word of challenge, reminding us of the need to follow God’s ways, as in today’s psalm: “The command of the Lord is clear; it gives light to the eyes.” The Word of God can encourage, reassure and challenge us, and more. Sometimes we may come to Mass with a question and we hear something in the readings which helps us see the way forward: it is God’s answer to our dilemma. Sometimes we hear something that deepens our faith, because we hear it and it makes perfect sense, or it has great beauty, or it inspires us. And always, listening to the readings helps us to know God better, because in the end, the Bible is His story, the account of Him revealing Himself to us and blessing us in so many ways.

Sometimes Christians have been referred to as the “people of the Book” because of our love for the Bible. But the Catechism says that we are not a “people of the Book”, but a “people of the Word”, because a book sits on a shelf, but the Word is proclaimed, heard and lived. Jesus today tells the people that the prophecy of Isaiah, the Word of God, is fulfilled even as they listen. And the Word of God is fulfilled here, today, too, even as we listen. We might even say *because* we listen. The spoken Word of God has power: power to create the world, to bring order out of chaos, to calm the storm, to transform bread and wine into the Lord’s Body and Blood. God speaks, and it happens. But in my heart, the transforming power of God’s Word can only be effective when I listen, because God gives me, us, freedom to hear or to ignore, to listen or to reject. If I accept it, it is life-changing good news. Always good, and always new. Given to us today. Fulfilled as we listen today. May the Lord give us open ears and hearts to welcome His Word, so that we may hear Him proclaim good news to us in our poverty, liberty to us in our captivity, new sight to us in our blindness, and a year of favour for us as we receive His gifts of grace.

Fr Andrew

