

The Vocalization of God's Fullest Word

Homily for Chrism Mass 2013 at St. Paul Cathedral Yakima

Isaiah 61:1-3a, 6a 8b-9; Revelation 1:5-8; Luke 4:16-21

Most Reverend Joseph J. Tyson, Bishop of Yakima

Peace be with you! *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.*

At this Chrism Mass the Church insists we hear these words twice – first from Isaiah and then from St. Luke. Why? Why does the Church emphasize these words of sacred scripture?

I'd like to begin with the academic research of my old teacher and mentor, Archbishop Brunett – the retired Archbishop of Seattle and current administrator of the Diocese of Oakland. As a young priest Archbishop Brunett went to the Middle East and visited Qumran seeing first-hand the caves where the Dead Sea Scrolls had been discovered.

For those of you unfamiliar with the Dead Sea Scrolls, in 1947 a young Palestinian shepherd boy while looking for a lost goat discovered caves containing ancient scrolls – including the most ancient edition of the Isaiah text ever discovered – the very text cited proclaimed by Jesus in today's Gospel. As scholars reviewed these ancient manuscripts they discovered how accurate the scriptures had been copied and handed down from one generation to the next.

But the challenge to all these ancient Hebrew texts is that ancient written Hebrew had no written vowels. The language was – and still is – written in consonants. As time went on, the language developed a series of dots and apostrophes to indicate vowels and vowel inflections.

But the ancient texts contained no such markers. So when someone was asked to stand in the synagogue to proclaim the ancient texts, the promulgator had to remember from memory what vowel to insert verbally into the written text. If you fail to hit the right vowel you fail to convey the true text. That's why standing in the synagogue "proclaiming" the scripture was such serious business in the ancient Near East at the time of Jesus.

Perhaps this is also why – in the words of today's Gospel – "...the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him...." For Jesus inserted the proper vowels from memory faithful to the prophet Isaiah vowels that clearly articulated "...glad tidings to the poor" and "...liberty to captives..." "...sight to the blind..." and a new world where the "...oppressed go free..." He literally "re-membered" the text!

Brothers, this is what you do. As good and holy priests of God here in the Diocese of Yakima you – from your heart – remember for our people the full text of these “glad tidings.” You give God’s Word – Jesus – a voice. You vocalize the Word of God so our people can be nourished through Word and Sacrament. Through bread and wine consecrated into the Body and Blood of Christ you – literally – re-member our people back into Christ.

Why is this so important? Because the people we serve often have very hard lives. Here in Central Washington where I was born and I now serve as bishop, I see our people work long hours in fruit warehouses, on farms, in vineyards and orchards and asparagus fields. Many speak limited English. Many have tiring jobs. Many of those jobs are mind-numbing. Sometimes they carry these stresses into their family life.

When I am tired or fatigued, or discouraged, or tempted or overwhelmed, I think of the people I’ve visited in the apple packing warehouses and then see in the cold early morning hours honoring our Lady of Guadalupe. Dare I be any less of myself for them? Dare I give them anything less than the best?

I take great courage in the words of our retired Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI back during Lent in 2006: “God does not allow darkness to prevail,” Benedict XVI wrote, “... rather there is a “divine limit imposed upon evil”, namely, mercy.” (*Memory and Identity*, pp.19ff.).

And I am greatly encouraged by the insight of our new Holy Father, Pope Francis who noted with clarity and directness, that when the country is poor, the poor are poorer.

My thanks to you – the clergy of Yakima – for allowing your selves to become God’s very “vowels” desiring to help your parishioners accurately articulate and remember the Word of God in their lives! I also give thanks to you, the worshipping assembly, for inserting the Word of God into the words of your daily life. I am especially for the manner in which you desire to insert this Word of Hope for those around you who are facing hardship and difficulty in their daily lives. Together may our lives echo the very first lesson of Jesus in this Gospel of St. Luke:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.

Peace be with you!