Peace be with you! St. Luke the Evangelist notes that after Jesus has read the Isaiah scroll that everyone in the synagogue looked intently at him? Why? Scripture scholars note that, unlike Modern Hebrew, that has letters for the consonants and small diacritical marks for the vowels, those ancient Hebrew manuscripts were written only with consonants. That meant that the person proclaiming the Isaiah scroll had to know from memory and by heart which vowel to insert into each and every word of the scripture.

Perhaps this is why those in the synagogue looked so intently on Jesus for when he inserted the vowels he inserted “…glad tidings to the poor…liberty to the captives…sight to the blind… and freedom to the oppressed.” Thus Jesus is not just inserting vowel from memory into this text of Isaiah. No. God – in Jesus – inserts himself into our human condition. Brothers, let me suggest that this “insertion of God into humanity” is precisely what marks our ministerial priesthood as we celebrate the seven sacraments with our people.

One of the more powerful instances of this for me came this last summer. I had just returned from Pajacuarán celebrating Fr. Lalo Barragán’s beautiful “Canta Misa” – his first Mass – and returned in time to celebrate Eucharist with our rural migrant farm workers harvesting cherries on a farm north of Prosser. It was a very hot day. I had a few extra passengers come home with me in my intestines so I was a little sick. Additionally, flying home on the plane, I had somehow twisted by spine getting into those tiny coach seats.

A woman came up to me wanting me to listen to her confession. Because I was not feeling real well, I asked for two chairs and sat down to celebrate with her the Rite of Penance. When we concluded I turned around and saw dozens of people lined up. I thought to myself, this is what you – my brother priests – experience. This is who you – the Yakima priests – are for so many of our people. Quite literally, through your priestly ministry, you insert God into the very hard lives of our people.

Regardless of language or culture, many of our people face very hard lives. For some – especially on the English speaking side – it’s the loneliness and separation from children they’ve educated and raised who’ve left the valley for better job opportunities in Portland, Seattle or other major cities. For others – especially on the Spanish speaking side – it’s the separation from loved ones back home, the fear of deportation and the stress of raising a family between two different languages and two different worlds – English and Spanish – Mexican and North America – Hispanic and Anglo.
Our people come to us – often in pain and struggle – desiring that we help them insert God back into their lives. For some that pain often comes from an acute sense of guilt and sin. Like San Juan Diego’s response to Our Lady of Guadalupe they feel themselves “...nada más que una escalera de tabla...” They feel they are so low in life that they are nothing more than a rickety wooden staircase – something that people walk on. They cannot believe that God has called them to a higher life, a deeper holiness or a call beyond themselves.

For others the complexity of daily life and the crush of work and family responsibilities dries them out spiritually to the point that the felt-sense of God has been deadened. Like the woman at the well in St. John’s Gospel, their parched interiority leaves them scarcely believe in a personal God who would insert himself into their lives and quench their thirst.

When our people come to us in their thirst and in their pain they look to us to see Jesus. They hope that this Chrism oil of ordination might salve their wounds and transform their daily struggles into a fragrant offer back to God. From us they desire to hear what the late Holy Father, St. John Paul the Second, noted; namely, that there is a “divine limit” imposed on sin and that limit is mercy. (Memory and Identity, pp. 19ff.)

If we are to remind them of this “divine limit” that mercy imposes against sin then – as priests – this means we have immersed ourselves in the Word of God and inserted ourselves into the very texts that Jesus proclaims in the synagogue. It means that we are faithful to our life of prayer, faithful to the radical emotional and relational availability that comes with the gift of celibacy, faithful to a simple lifestyle that allows us to put our people first, faithful to our promise of obedience to the Church who confirmed our priestly call.

In short, like those who hear Jesus in the synagogue and like those we serve today, we must look intently on Jesus who – even now – inserts himself with all of his humanity and all of his divinity into this celebration of the Eucharist.

Brothers in a few short weeks we will make our retreat together. We will bring ourselves and our people to prayer together as the Yakima presbyterate. I thank you – the priests of the Diocese of Yakima – for the many ways you give yourselves to your parishioners and – parishioners of this great Diocese of Yakima – I thank you for the many ways you call our priests to become ever better icons of Jesus Christ. Together, may we fix our gaze on Jesus! Peace be with you.