

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, A – July 12, 2020 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham – 5pm Vigil, 7:15, 8:30, & 11am Sunday Masses – 965 words

The Word of God always has the power to achieve what it sets out to do – so the first reading reminded us. And we recall that the Word of God is not only the Bible; no, we Catholics recognize both Scripture and Tradition together as the complete revelation of God’s Word. So in our attentive reading or hearing of Scripture and our study of Church teachings, we have a true encounter with the living Word of God. But then we recall also that the Word became flesh; that the Lord Jesus is the living embodiment of the Word of God. All that has come down to us in Scripture and Tradition is summed up in and flows from Christ. Thus, in each Holy Communion, we also come face to face with the Word of God and invite him to take root in our souls.

Yes, the Word of God is always effective. But our experience might sometimes leave us wondering if that is really true, as we wrestle with our sins and weaknesses and our seeming lack of progress. The Parable of the Sower in today’s gospel, however, helps us to see another angle: namely, that while the Word of God always has the power to achieve its purpose, yet it must be received in the correct conditions. In other words, it does not just force itself upon us and “do its thing”, apart from our fruitful cooperation. And Jesus, in the authoritative interpretation he gives of the parable, tells us of four factors that can impede the good success of the Word: namely, the devil, superficiality, tribulation, and worldly cares or riches.

This week, I will speak of the first one, the devil. Many blame their temptations on him. But that is often to give him far too much credit – which, incidentally, he is happy to take. We are fallen creatures who have further introduced disorder into our hearts through our many sinful choices. Many of the things we consider to be temptations from without arise quite readily from within – from our own hearts – which are not yet sufficiently clean and remain in such need of healing. We would do well not to be so quick to assign credit to the devil when tempted. But that does not mean he is not still active, “prowling around like a roaring lion”, as the scripture says.¹ He is most certainly trying to impede the taking-root of God’s Word in our souls.

Very often, this happens because we have actively invited him in, in some way. Consider so-called “adult entertainment”,² for example: one used to have to go to the seedy part of town to find it, but now we access it easily and freely in the privacy of our lovely homes. To do so is to ask the devil to entertain us, to open the door and invite him in. And more than the door of our homes, we open the door of our hearts. It’s a cheap thrill with costly results; it is, in fact, a deadly pandemic. The struggle with this foe is real for many today, to be sure. We must all fight against it – and shield our children from it. If we do not, we may well end up with an unwelcome visitor, who afflicts and hassles us to one degree or another, and who will not easily go away.

Another common way that we might invite the devil into our lives is through superstition, whereby we assign supernatural powers or effects to things that do not inherently have them. The devil and his minions are happy to cooperate with that effort, for they are far more powerful than we and have dominion over the natural world. When we indulge in superstitious practices, we effectively invite them to show up. But all our trust and hope needs to be in God alone; we must shun any and all superstition, even that which seems to be “just for laughs”. Remember that the devil tricks us with glamor – he can make evil look attractive. That’s how he got Adam and Eve, and that ruse works on us, also, if we are not vigilant in guarding our hearts and homes.

¹ 1 Peter 5:8.

² It is not my intention to shy away from naming a problem (and a sin) clearly for what it is – but to avoid generating any unhealthy curiosity in children, who may be listening and not yet have a mature understanding of these concepts.

Let our motto always be, “As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord”, to quote the prophet Joshua from the Old Testament.³ This means that we must guard not only the doors, but the windows, the other things with screens, and especially our hearts. And if there have been any breaches, we should avail ourselves of the means to repair them: good use of the sacrament of Confession; having a priest bless our homes and even consecrate them to the Sacred Heart of Jesus; praying the Rosary as individuals and as families; seeking and supporting good and clean entertainment; and trying to recover those innocent and fulfilling pastimes that families used to turn to before life in our world got so very crazy and complicated.

Now, more than ever, is the time for all serious Christians to live earnest and intentional lives and critically examine where those lives are headed. We want to welcome the Word of God into our hearts and homes; we want it to take root there and bear good, abundant, and lasting fruit. This is first and foremost God’s work; but we do have to cultivate the ground, as it were, and otherwise cooperate – and also guard the points of entry and eject any and all intruders. We know very well our weaknesses, but our good Lord has not left us without copious remedies – and above all, his grace. So we pray that he may strengthen our resolve, giving us eyes to see and ears to hear. May he help us, deliver us, and always stay with us!

³ Joshua 24:15.