

### ***The Voice of the Lord***

In the name of him who is the Life and Light of the world, dear friends in Jesus: St. Luke the Evangelist relates that on one occasion a Roman centurion appealed to Jesus for help. He had a valued servant who was sick and near the point of death. He asked Jesus to heal the man. Jesus indicated that he would come at once; but the centurion said no, that wasn't necessary. He said, "I am unworthy that you should come and enter my home. Merely speak the word and my servant will be healed. For you see, I also am a man of authority. If I say to one of my men, 'do this', he does it. And if I say to another, 'go there', he goes." We are told that Jesus marveled at this man's great faith – especially considering that he was a Gentile, a man not from the race of God's chosen people. Jesus took to task the Jews who were standing around listening because they were always doubting him, even though spiritually speaking they had all the advantages; but here was fellow who had true faith in the power of Jesus' Word despite his disadvantages.

Now, I have to confess that my own military experience was not quite the same as the centurion's. When I held roughly the same rank as an Army captain, I found that just because I ordered a soldier under my command to do something or go someplace, it didn't necessarily happen. I usually had to check to make sure. Though my words carried legal authority, they didn't always accomplish what I wanted. You parents can appreciate this, I'm sure. If you tell your son or daughter to clean their room, you expect it to be done; but you'd still better check to make sure that it was, and that it was done right. Children (like soldiers) sometimes like to take unauthorized shortcuts, like cramming assorted junk and dirty laundry under a bed or in a closet where it's out of sight. Likewise, when any one of us is ordering in a restaurant, one place you expect your words to carry some weight – after all, they are there to serve you, right? You say, "I'll have this menu item, I want the meat prepared this way, and the potatoes like this, and this kind of salad dressing—*that's* not always what arrives on the table. And it could be for any number of reasons. Maybe the waitress didn't understand, maybe she wrote it down wrong, maybe the cook couldn't decipher what she wrote or just made a mistake. My point is that even in the best circumstances, when you have every reason to expect the words you say to accomplish precisely what you intend, it doesn't always happen.

But this is not true when the Lord speaks. When he says something, when he issues a command, when he speaks his Word, whatever he says *happens*. This is the unifying theme in all of today's readings from Holy Scripture. Take the Psalm we read earlier. "The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty." The idea is that when God speaks, mighty wonders take place. The psalmist even uses some graphic poetic imagery to illustrate what he's saying. He says, "The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness, it flashes with fire, and it shatters the cedars of Lebanon." He means that God's voice is like lightning and thunder that causes the ground to tremble. And when a blazing blue bolt of lightning strikes even a huge cedar tree it makes the pitch inside explode and the tree disintegrates into splinters. Ka-Pow! He's giving us a visual image of the awesome power of God's Word.

Then we have the reading from Genesis. It's the first five verses of the Bible – where we are introduced to the Lord God: who he is and how he operates. But even before that, it describes the initial state of the earth: it's dark, empty, chaotic, lifeless; it looks like no good could ever come of it. Ah, but then the Lord draws near. And yes, while it's true that he is everywhere present in his creation, he makes himself present in a special, local way as he turns

his attention on the world. He has his Spirit hovering over the face of the deep waters under which the earth is submerged. And that word “hovering” is sometimes better translated “brooding”. It’s the Hebrew word that describes the way a mother bird sits on her eggs and protects them and keeps them warm. The idea is that the Spirit of God is intensely interested in the world, and that he’s doting over the life that’s about to be brought forth on it.

And then, with the Spirit in place, God speaks his powerful Word. “Be light!” And that’s exactly what happens: the world is at once bathed in brilliant light whose only source is the voice of God. And I’m sure you remember what follows next. For six days the Lord continues to speak. As he does, things happen – good things. The earth is brought progressively from darkness to light, from chaos to order, from emptiness to fullness, and from lifelessness to life, all by the powerful Word of God. And the thing to see here is not just that this is how the Lord created everything and how we got here; but also it tells us this is who God is and how he deals with his creation. He does everything by speaking his powerful Word—not just back then, but throughout all history and even today.

We get a glimpse of this in the Gospel reading for today, which describes the ministry of St. John the Baptizer and the Baptism of Jesus. Now, a lot of people are confused by this. They see John calling sinners to repentance and to be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins, and they wonder why Jesus shows up to be baptized. Why would he do that since he’s not a sinner himself? It doesn’t seem to make sense. But we need to understand that there’s more going on here. First, by coming to be baptized, Jesus is identifying himself with sinners. Though he is indeed sinless, his mission is to take upon himself the sins of the world. When he gives his life as the sacrifice to atone for sins on the cross, he will be counted by his Father as the only sinner who ever lived. So it makes sense that Jesus begins his ministry to save us by being numbered with sinners. And if you think about it, what’s going on here is that all these rotten sinners are being cleansed by their washing in the Jordan. It’s like the Jordan is becoming an entire river polluted by sin. And since Jesus is clean, when he goes into the water, it’s like all those sins are making him dirty. He’s like a sponge soaking them up so that he can later bear them to the cross and there pay the penalty God requires of all who sin.

So that’s part of why Jesus is baptized; the other big reason is that by being baptized, Jesus is locating himself in every Christian Baptism. I mentioned before that though God is everywhere present, he sometimes makes himself present in a special, local way. Certainly Jesus himself is an example of that. As he walked the earth, he was God in human flesh. And, of course, he still is today; even though we don’t see him walking around anymore. But if I ask, “Where can I find him even though I can’t see him?” one of the answers to that question is Baptism. By being baptized, Jesus is telling us that he is in Baptism. And just as sinners were cleansed in the Jordan and their guilt was transferred to Jesus, so also are the sins of everyone who is baptized into Christ.

But now look what happens when Jesus is baptized. As he’s coming up out of the water, the heavens are rent open and he sees the Spirit descending on him in the form of a dove. And that should remind us of Genesis: the Spirit hovering over the face of the deep as God began to shape, fill, and give life to the formless earth. That’s what’s happening here. The world is once again dark, chaotic, void, and dead due to sin. So the Lord is creating anew. And Jesus, the Word of God made flesh, is going to be the agent through whom the Lord does this recreating. And so, with the Spirit in place over the Re-creator, the Father speaks, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” Yes, God saw that his Son is good – his Son who is the Light of the world. Get it?

And we know that these words of approval spoken by the Father were powerful because of what follows immediately after the Baptism of Jesus. St. Mark tells us that at once Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he fasted for 40 days while he was being tempted by the devil. Now, it would be wrong to say that without this message from heaven and the certainty of his Father's approval, Jesus would not have been able to withstand going without food and being tempted; but I think it's right to say that these Words of God to him did make him stronger and better able to defeat the enemy. For as Jesus himself said when being tempted, "Man does not live by bread alone; but by every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God." The Word of God: that's where the power of life, light, and salvation is.

And I hasten to add that this is true regardless of who speaks the Word of God. Sure, we see the light coming on in creation and Jesus being strengthened when it's the actual voice of the Lord; but in today's Gospel we also see the power of God's Word as it is being spoken through the mouth of John. I mean, what would make hardened sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, crooks and thieves of every description – the kind of people who made their living from sinning, who wallowed in the worst kind of spiritual darkness, and who had no fear of the Lord whatsoever – what would make them leave their comfortable homes, travel far out into a desert wasteland, and get dunked in the tepid waters of the Jordan by some half-crazed, wild-eyed evangelist wearing a camel hair coat? It sure wasn't the prospect of getting to share a meal of grasshoppers with John. Yuck. No, it was power of God's Word that John spoke. That's what drew them like moths to a flame. That's what caused them to quake with fear at the coming judgment. That's what caused them to confess their sins with tears of sorrow. And that's what gave them relief as their sins were washed away in Baptism. And it's also what gave them the strength and ability to resist temptation and to amend their sinful lives from that time forward. The power and authority to do all that was in the Word of God that John proclaimed.

And it still is today. As the Word of God being is proclaimed by pastors, by teachers, by parents, or by anyone for that matter, the Lord is accomplishing great and mighty wonders. Through his powerful Word he is giving people who are in darkness light, he's filling their empty lives with meaning, he's bringing order to their chaos, and he's giving life to their souls that were dead in sin. And perhaps nowhere do we see this more clearly than in Baptism. That's where your Christian life began. That's where and when you first encountered Jesus – where he was in the water of Baptism. It was then that the Spirit hovered over the water and the mighty words were spoken by which you were united with Jesus in his death for sin, his burial in the tomb, and his resurrection to new life. It was then that for you, the Light of the world came on in your heart and mind. Your faith in Christ was born. You became a part of his new creation – a member of his body. And though these words of God may not have been heard audibly out of heaven, because you were baptized into Jesus these Words of the Father certainly were applied to you: "You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased."

This is what Paul is talking about in today's Epistle lesson: the powerful miracles of regeneration and renewal that happened to all of us when we were baptized into Christ. The question is: do you believe them? Let's run through a checklist. The main theme of today's message is the inherent power of God's Word. Do you believe it? Do you believe that when God speaks, mighty miracles occur?

Okay. Do you believe that these miracles take place regardless of who speaks God's Word?

Good. Do trust that your Baptism was effective; that when you were baptized and the water and Word were applied to you, your sins were washed away, you were given the gift of the Holy Spirit, you were incorporated into the body of Christ, and that in you the light of faith came on? Do you believe all that?

Perfect. Because if you believe all these things, you should also believe the rest of what Paul says in today's reading from Romans. He speaks of the power you have been given by God's Word in Baptism to resist temptation and to overcome sin. And it's here where we who rely on God's grace in Christ so often fall down. Because we know that God is gracious and that he freely forgives sins for Christ's sake, we find it easier to simply continue living with our habitual sins and then constantly reapplying to Jesus for forgiveness, than to do the far more difficult task of struggling to overcome our sins and give them up. We tell ourselves it's too hard; that we simply haven't got the strength. And we imagine that because the Lord knows how weak we are in this area or that, that he doesn't mind so much when we cross the line for the umpteenth-thousandth time.

This is precisely the sort of defeatist (or sinfully opportunistic) mindset that Paul is arguing against. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not a license to continue in sin. No, it's blood bought forgiveness – and with that forgiveness, the power of God's Word to be free of your enslavement to sin. Paul writes, "We know that our old self was crucified with [Jesus] in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin." In your Baptism, you died with Christ. And having died with him to sin, you have now been raised with him to new life. "So consider yourself dead to sin and alive to God in Christ."

In practical terms, it all comes down to whose voice you choose to listen to. If you listen to Satan, if you listen to your old, sinful nature, then you'll continue to fall for the same old habitual sins. But if you listen to what the Lord is saying: that you have died to sin with Christ, that he counts you righteous for Christ's sake, that you are his beloved child, and that he has given you supernatural strength by his Word and Spirit to resist temptation and to live as one of his children – that is to say, if you believe in the power and authority of God's Word like the Roman centurion did – then all things are possible.

Therefore confessing our past failures and defeats, and receiving again Christ's sure Word of forgiveness, let's resolve to live every day from here on out in the grace and power of God's Word given to us in our Baptisms. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***