**THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR C)**

Saints Severian and his wife Aquila, martyrs; Saint Ildephonsus of Toledo, Bishop; Saint Amasius of Teano, Bishop

Neh 8:2-4a,5-6,8-10; Ps 19; 1Cor 12:12-30; Lk 1:1-4;4:14-21

*Your words, Lord, are Spirit and life*

**COMMENTARY**

The Third Sunday in Ordinary Time was declared by Pope Francis with his Apostolic Letter *Aperuit illis*, published on 30 September 2019, to be “the Sunday of the Word of God.” The Pontiff highlights: “The relationship between the Risen Lord, the community of believers and sacred Scripture is essential to our identity as Christians. Without the Lord who opens our minds to them, it is impossible to understand the Scriptures in depth. Yet the contrary is equally true: without the Scriptures, the events of the mission of Jesus and of his Church in this world would remain incomprehensible. Hence, Saint Jerome could rightly claim: ‘Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ’” (*Commentary on the Book of Isaiah*, Prologue: PL 24,17B) (no.1). And will Christ be announced by the one who does not know Him? Moreover, “A day devoted to the Bible should not be seen as a yearly event but rather a year-long event, for we urgently need to grow in our knowledge and love of the Scriptures and of the risen Lord, who continues to speak his word and to break bread in the community of believers. For this reason, we need to develop a closer relationship with sacred Scripture; otherwise, our hearts will remain cold and our eyes shut, struck as we are by so many forms of blindness” (no.8). And if a Christian heart is cold, how will it be able to communicate the warmth of Christ’s love to others?

Therefore, all of us Christians, especially those engaged in the front line of the mission *ad gentes*, are called this time to (re)start living the Word of God seriously every day, to always listen to and follow God’s voice deep down in our hearts, and then to share it with others. Today will be the right time to discover the depth and richness of God’s message in the Scriptures, particularly in the teaching of Christ Himself transmitted to us by the apostles (cf. Lk 1:1-4). By divine providence, the Gospel of this Mass makes us listen again to the fundamental declaration of Jesus in a key episode that St. Luke, unlike the other evangelists, intentionally placed at the beginning of his public activities: “Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.” Let us reflect on every detail of this sentence, because it will help us to recommence our journey with the Word of God.

1. “*Today*.” This is the key word in Jesus’ declaration and it reflects a fundamental concept in the Scriptures. This “today” not only refers to that precise day in the past in the Synagogue of Nàzaret, but also, and above all, indicates the perennial existential moment of salvation. St. Luke emphasizes this aspect, using a series of “todays” in his Gospel: “For *today*, […] a savior has been born for you” (Lk 2:11); “Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for *today* I must stay at your house. […] *Today* salvation has come to this house” (Lk 19:5-9); and on the cross Jesus said to the repentant thief, “*today* you will be with me in Paradise” (Lk 23:43); He did not say, “Wait for my resurrection on the third day and you will be with me in paradise,” but “today,” this “today!” It is therefore not so much a “today” of time but rather that “today” of God’s salvation in the life of the person to whom it is addressed.

Thus, in the Bible we have many “todays,” which spiritually are not different days, but actually converge in a great “today” of the living Word of God, addressed to every listener or reader in his/her own time to call everyone to life in God. For this reason, here is the voice of God for our “today” in a famous text in the Old Testament: “Oh, that *today* you would hear his voice: Do not harden your hearts as at Meribah, as on the day of Massah in the desert. There your ancestors tested me” (Ps 95:7-9). And here is the Word of God in the New Testament, in the letter to the Hebrews, which echoes precisely that announced “today”, in order to patiently invite the people of the New Covenant to think about it: “Encourage yourselves daily while it is still ‘today,’ so that none of you may grow hardened by the deceit of sin. We have become partners of Christ if only we hold the beginning of the reality firm until the end, for it is said: ‘Oh, that today you would hear his voice: Harden not your hearts as at the rebellion.’ Who were those who rebelled when they heard?” (Heb 3:13-16). Are there still some hard-hearted ones among us today, when we listen to those sacred words again?

2. “*[Today] this Scripture passage is fulfilled*.” Jesus declares He is the fulfillment of the Scriptures He has just proclaimed “today”. His fulfillment of the quoted passage of Isaiah gives us a glimpse of two aspects in this regard.

First, we see God’s faithfulness in fulfilling His word. Indeed, in God every word is already action, as the meaning of the Hebrew term *dabar* suggests and as seen in creation: God said..., and so it happened (cf. e.g., Gn 1:3,6-7,9). The prophet Isaiah himself transmitted God’s statement in this regard: “Yet just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to the one who sows and bread to the one who eats, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; *it shall not return to me empty, but shall do what pleases me, achieving the end for which I sent it*” (Is 55:10-11).

Secondly, the fulfillment of Scripture in the life of Christ will not be a static fulfillment. It is something that always goes beyond the things foretold with human language, which sometimes expresses purely human concepts. In Christ, God fulfills his Word in surprising ways, that is, always surprising us with his perennial newness. Thus, on the one hand, Jesus proclaims: “Do not think that I have come to abolish *the Law or the Prophets* [that means, all Scriptures]. I have come not to abolish but *to fulfill*” (Mt 5:17). On the other hand, in quoting the passage from Isaiah, Jesus declares his mission as already described in the Scriptures, but rightly stops at the words “to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.” He did not continue with the sentence, expression of a belligerent human language, which follows in the original text of Isaiah: “[to announce] a day of vindication by our God” (Is 61:2). In this way, He focused on the authentic mission, received from God, to inaugurate the era of the Lord’s grace that is valid for all humanity, including Israel’s “enemies.” (God’s triumph will be that of mercy, life and salvation). Even more, Jesus has validated forever, in this perennial “year” of divine grace, the four basic activities that He will perform as the “anointed one” sent by God “to bring *glad tidings to the poor*, to proclaim *liberty to captives*, recovery of *sight to the blind*; to let *the oppressed go free*” (cf. Lk 4:18).

From this list of God’s salvific actions through Christ, the first is the core of Jesus’ messianic mission, that is “to *bring glad tidings* to the poor” or literally “*to* *evangelize* the poor,” where the focus is on the action of announcing more than on the content of what is announced. Thus, giving answer to a doubting John the Baptist, Jesus confirmed His identity as the Messiah awaited by the people, by emphasizing that with Him “the poor have the good news proclaimed to them,” or literally “the poor are evangelized” (cf. Mt 11:5). So, if this and other actions mentioned were dear to Jesus, they will certainly be so for each of us His missionary disciples of today who are called to reflect constantly on them and to put them into practice for a continuous fulfillment of the Word. (This was very dear to Saint Eugene de Mazenod, founder of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, who chose it as the motto for his Missionary Society: “*Evangelizare Pauperibus Misit Me. Pauperes Evangelizantur*”). And as for Jesus, so for the Church, evangelization is her mission that determines her vocation and identity. Pope Francis reminds us of this in his recent message for World Mission Sunday 2022: “To evangelize is the very identity of the Church.”

3. “*[Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled] in your hearing*.” This sentence sounds enigmatic in its Greek original, which translates literally: “Today this Scripture is fulfilled *in your ears.*” Such an expression demonstrates the double nature of this fulfillment. On the one hand, the fulfillment of the Word of God is an objective reality, independent of human will and depending solely on the will of God. In fact, at that precise moment in the Synagogue of Nazareth, everything is fulfilled with and in the person of Jesus, with or without the listeners’ consent. On the other hand, the Word of God requires and invites those who listen to it to collaborate, so that it is actually fulfilled in them. Otherwise put, the fulfillment of Sacred Scriptures also implies some subjective dimension. Thus, Jesus exhorts, “Whoever has ears to hear ought to hear” (Mk 4:9). Moreover, to a woman who said to him “Blessed is the womb that carried you and the breasts at which you nursed,” Jesus replied, “Rather, blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it” (Lk 11:27-28).

Before such a heartfelt call of Jesus, who among us will still be indifferent? May these words of the apostle Peter also be ours today: “Master, we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing, but *at your Word* I will lower the nets” (cf. Lk 5:5). Amen!

*Useful points to consider:*

“Since the entire People of God is a people which has been ‘sent,’ the Synod reaffirmed that ‘the mission of proclaiming the word of God is the task of all of the disciples of Jesus Christ based on their Baptism.’ No believer in Christ can feel dispensed from this responsibility which comes from the fact of our sacramentally belonging to the Body of Christ. A consciousness of this must be revived in every family, parish, community, association and ecclesial movement. The Church, as a mystery of communion, is thus entirely missionary, and everyone, according to his or her proper state in life, is called to give an incisive contribution to the proclamation of Christ.” (Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church, *Verbum Domini*, 94)

“In calling upon all the faithful to proclaim God’s word, the Synod Fathers restated the need in our day too for a decisive commitment to the *missio ad gentes*. In no way can the Church restrict her pastoral work to the ‘ordinary maintenance’ of those who already know the Gospel of Christ. Missionary outreach is a clear sign of the maturity of an ecclesial community. The Fathers also insisted that the word of God is the saving truth which men and women in every age need to hear. For this reason, it must be explicitly proclaimed. The Church must go out to meet each person in the strength of the Spirit (cf. *1 Cor* 2:5) and continue her prophetic defence of people’s right and freedom to hear the word of God, while constantly seeking out the most effective ways of proclaiming that word, even at the risk of persecution. The Church feels duty-bound to proclaim to every man and woman the word that saves (cf. *Rom* 1:14).” (Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church, *Verbum Domini*, 95)

“There is a close relationship between the testimony of Scripture, as the self-attestation of God’s word, and the witness given by the lives of believers. One implies and leads to the other. Christian witness communicates the word attested in the Scriptures. For their part, the Scriptures explain the witness which Christians are called to give by their lives. Those who encounter credible witnesses of the Gospel thus come to realize how effective God’s word can be in those who receive it.” (Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church, *Verbum Domini*, 97)

“In this interplay between witness and word we can understand what Pope Paul VI stated in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. Our responsibility is not limited to suggesting shared values to the world; rather, we need to arrive at an explicit proclamation of the word of God. Only in this way will we be faithful to Christ’s mandate: ‘The Good News proclaimed by the witness of life sooner or later has to be proclaimed by the word of life. There is no true evangelization unless the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the Kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, are proclaimed.’” (Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church, *Verbum Domini*, 98)