

**Ponder the Word.**

**When we hear the Word of God read to us at Mass,  
are we open & humble enough to expect & accept  
a message that speaks to our situation.**

I don't know whether you spotted that thing from the first reading. It's one of my favourite texts, I love it. It runs,

"On the square before the Water Gate, in the presence of the men and women, and children old enough to understand, he read from the book from early morning till noon. All the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law."

Now, even if early morning was only 8 o'clock, that was four hours of reading of the Book of the Law, and commenting on it. Nobody said,

"I'm bored. Can I go home, mom?"

So what was going on here? Something very profound, I think. Further down, we actually hear,

"For the people were all in tears as they listened to the words of the law."

Now why were they in tears? They were clearly moved. It was obviously a ritual experience that moved them to the heart and led them to worship.

I think one of the things you need to take in, there's only one colloquial phrase that can explain it, really. But we're talking about Israel who were, relative to their neighbors, a tin pot nation. A tiny group of nomads who settled in the land of Canaan, surviving amidst sophisticated empires like Egypt, and Assyria, and Persia. With those big empires and incredible cities, with infrastructure, art, culture, Israel was backward. But the one thing that they did have that was superior was the Law of God.. When they settled in the land of Canaan, of course, their neighbours used to sacrifice their children to the gods. It seemed to work. (laughter). But you know they had, in the law, in the Revelation, received to Moses, a law that focused on justice, sanctity of life, compassion, neighbourliness, help for the poor and so on.

There was a copy of the book of the Law discovered in the temple, when they came back here from exile in Nehemiah and Ezra's time. They'd come back from exile and found a copy of the Book of the Law. This was the beginning of the Feast of Tabernacles, and it was read out aloud before all the people. So they were deeply moved with this religious experience of being restored. And it became a law that it had to be read publicly every seven years because this revelation they got needed to be imbedded in their hearts. To say that they were primitive in many ways the Law was far more sophisticated than anything around them. So, of course, child sacrifice, was anathema, as we get with the Abraham story. Their sense of justice, and equity, and how to live together peaceably was not just in the 10 Commandments, but the whole of the Deuteronomic law, the Old Testament book.

And so they have this very ethical approach - Even if when you look at something like,

"An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth,"

that Jesus eventually criticized, it was actually a means of stopping vengeance and blood lust. Because it was in effect saying you get the equivalent compensation for what was taken from you. It was a justice system.

And when we move into the Gospel, we see Jesus attending what was a relatively newfangled thing. It didn't exist in Ezra's time, I don't think, and Nehemiah's. It was borne from restoration and that's the synagogue tradition, because there was a great movement to make sure that people understood the law. And the synagogue was based around the study of the Scriptures with a commentary from a rabbi. So we see Jesus attending the synagogue, as he usually did, and taking almost the place of a rabbi by reading the scroll and commenting on it. And he draws out another important aspect of the Jewish tradition that we've inherited. And he says,

"This text is being fulfilled today."

Because Jesus and most of the Jews knew that the Word of God was not primarily written in the book. It was what God spoke and was a living creative text. In other words, God's Word was creative. So whenever they came to the synagogue they listened to the Word looking for a message for the community

or for themselves. There might have been something that God was wanting us to do. And also they believed, very profoundly, that when they invoked God and spoke His Word, they were asking him to act on the very word that was read. So when Jesus read,

"The spirit of the Lord has been given to me. For he has anointed me," and so on, there would be a tension in the room, waiting for His comment and he was saying,

"God is acting. This text is being fulfilled today."

You could imagine the,

"Ah!" from them.

Their understanding of the power of the Word to be so creative. And this is what we bring to our understanding of liturgy.

Now, their understanding of sacrifice - They did do sacrifices, but the main sacrifice was in the temple. The official ritual sacrifices in the temple. The high priest did it for the blessing of the harvest, and so on, and for the forgiveness of sins. There was a whole ritual around it, and only he could get to go into the centre of the temple, the high priest, the Holy of Holies. And when Christ, at the Last Supper, instituted the Eucharist, he brought all that knowledge and understanding of the temple worship and connected it with the synagogue tradition, with celebrating it with His disciples.

"Take this and eat it. This is my body."

And that understanding of sacrifice for all our needs, and so on, is fulfilled in Christ once and for all. Sacrifice that we re-live in the power of his Word in the Eucharist.

And it's at this stage, when I've preached a long time, I really look to see if all the people, as in Nehemiah's day were in tears as they listened to the word of Father Richard from morning till noon. (Laughter). No, because there's no music you're getting a long sermon! Today reminds us that liturgy is about being moved, by being involved in it. Both in the Word and the sacrifice. And we draw from that rich tradition from the Jewish days of Jesus.