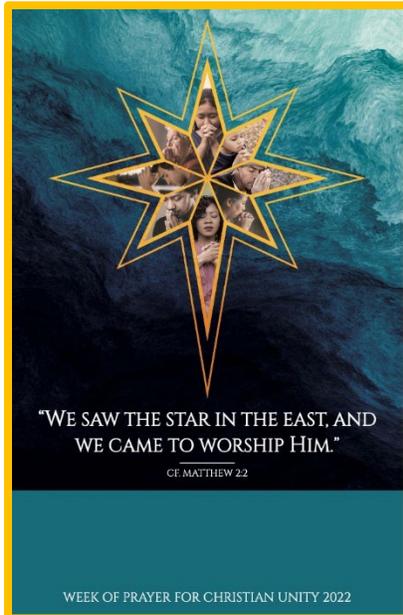


REFLECTIONS FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME ~ 23 January 2022

The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale

Today is the annual Sunday of the Word of God established by Pope Francis in 2019. In the letter naming the day, Pope Francis said, "I hereby declare that the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time is to be devoted to the celebration, study and dissemination of the word of God. This Sunday of the Word of God will thus be a fitting part of that time of the year when we are encouraged to strengthen our bonds with the Jewish people and to pray for Christian unity. This is more than a temporal coincidence: the celebration of the Sunday of the Word of God has ecumenical value, since the Scriptures point out, for those who listen, the path to authentic and firm unity."



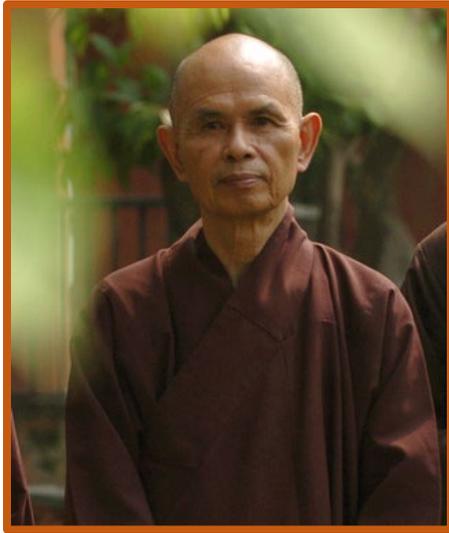
It is not a coincidence then that this is also Sunday during the Week for Christian Unity which ends on this coming Tuesday. This year's theme for the Week is, "We saw the star in the East, and we came to worship him" (Mt 2:2), prepared by the Middle East Council of Churches (from Beirut, Lebanon). The theme speaks to the world's need for solidarity and transformation in facing current political, economic, and social challenges, as well as the injustices highlighted and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Of this Week, Pope Francis says, "We Christians, in the diversity of our confessions and traditions, are also pilgrims on our way to full unity, and we come closer to our goal the more we keep our gaze fixed on Jesus, our only Lord."

Our readings in today's Liturgy of the Word centre us on the Word of God in the many diverse ways in which God speaks to us. God's first word is spoken to create the universe, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Gen 1:1-3). The universe in turn becomes the word of God. Richard Rohr ofm says it simply yet profoundly, "Creation itself is the first incarnation of Christ, the primary and foundational 'Bible' that reveals the path to God."

The Scriptures have also been telling us this, but only in recent times have we begun to hear what the Scriptures were saying. Today's Psalm 19 begins with these words, "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world" (Ps 19:1-4). We are familiar with the words from Job, "But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you" (Job 12:7-8). God's word, spoken at creation, continues



every day in every expression of new galaxies, new planets, new plants and trees, newborn animals, newborn babies.



Earth herself is an ongoing expression of the word of God. During this past week, we learned of the death of the beloved Buddhist monk and teacher from Vietnam, Thich Nhat Hanh. In his *Love Letter to the Earth*, he said, “At this very moment, the Earth is above you, below you, all around you, and even inside you. The Earth is everywhere. You may be used to thinking of the Earth as only the ground beneath your feet. But the water, the sea, the sky, and everything around us comes from the Earth. Everything outside us and everything inside us comes from the Earth. We often forget that the planet we are living on has given us all the elements that make up our bodies. The water in our flesh, our bones, and all the microscopic cells inside our bodies all come from the Earth and are part of the Earth. The Earth is not just the environment we live in. We are the Earth and we are always carrying her within us.”

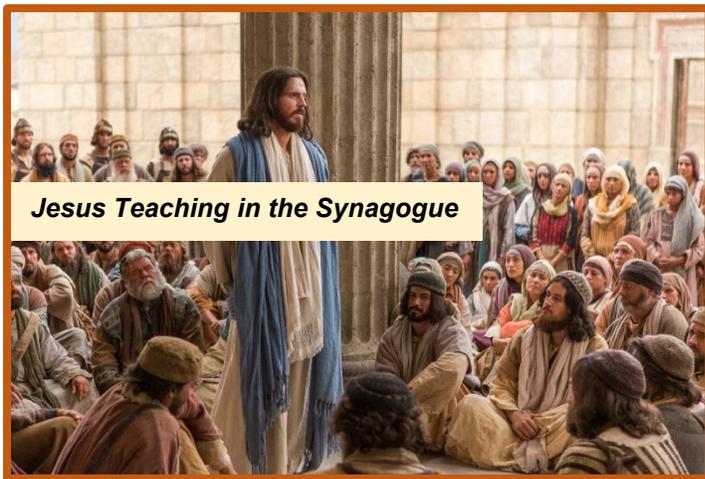
God’s word is spoken again in the coming of Jesus into our midst. John says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:1-2, 14). Jesus speaks God’s word by his very presence among us, begun in his years in Judah and Galilee, and continued now in his life within us, within all creation.

When we hear the phrase “Word of God,” our first thought tends to be the written word in our Scriptures. Every religious tradition has its holy books. We are blessed to share parts of our Scriptures, our Bible, with Jews and with Muslims. One of my favourite passages from the Old Testament is today’s reading from the book of Nehemiah, set in the time when the people have just returned from exile. Now they are no longer the people of the land (the land belongs to the Persians, then to the Greeks, then to the Romans). But, as today’s reading proclaims, they have become the people of the book. Notice how carefully the writer of Nehemiah tells us to whom Ezra is reading the Torah (the book of the Law), “men and women and all who could hear with understanding” (Neh 8:2, 3) – this is so important that it is repeated twice in this short passage. The reading of the word is for everyone in the community, not just the priests and scribes and Levites, not just the men, not just the adults, but everyone who can understand. The word is meant for the community and for the individuals in the community.

There are three other connections made in the reading. The people on hearing the reading bowed down their heads and worshipped the God. The reading is God speaking, but it is not complete until the people hear, understand, and respond. The time of the reading makes the day holy which in turn causes us to know that “the joy of the Lord is our strength” (Neh 8:10). And that is cause for celebration, for eating good food and drinking good wine and sharing with those who have no food. And it is no coincidence that the reading happens at the Water Gate, the place where the people come for lifegiving water for themselves and for their animals. This connects us back to God’s word spoken first at creation with the creation of water on days two and three (Gen 1:6-10).

The word is not simply about hearing; it is about a response from our whole being – our emotions, our rejoicing, our celebrating in community with shared meals, our sharing our food with those who have none. The word of God is not complete until the heavens and Earth respond, until the Earth creatures respond, until people respond. Psalm 19 again reminds us that the word is never simply the word alone, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you” (Ps 19:14).

In today’s Gospel Jesus reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah (61:1-2), “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour” (Lk 4:17-19). Veronica Lawson rsm helps us understand the meaning of Jesus’ teaching here, “The Greek word translated as ‘oppressed’ literally means ‘shattered’. It evokes images of asylum seekers in detention centres and of the hundreds of thousands displaced by war or persecution. It evokes the pain of the Earth itself and the more-



than-human inhabitants of our planet suffering the effects of the climate crisis and ecological destruction. If the gospel message is to be well-grounded in our times, the ‘destitute’ and ‘shattered’ of our Earth community, the destitute of the human community and the endangered plant and animal species of the planet, must find the ‘release’ of which the gospel speaks.”

And finally, God’s word is spoken by you and me. Indeed, for some, you may be the only Gospel people will ever read! Think about the terrible wonder of

that, the intense joy of that – God trusts you and me to be the word of God in our space and in our time. When you support someone by your words or your presence, you are God’s word for that person. When you fail to do so, you are denying that person the right to hear God’s word from you. Our reading from 1 Corinthians reminds us that every single one of us, in our own unique way, brings a reflection of God’s presence in the gifts which God gives us. No one of us has better gifts or a better reflection of God’s word. Each one of us has the special privilege of using our gifts to build up others and to build up the community. We are bearers of the word of God, sometimes by our words and sometimes by our presence alone. We are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

We conclude our reflections with this simple poem from [Anne Osdieck](#) which gathers many of the threads together:

Jesus
stood up,
unrolled the scroll
just as had Ezra, the priest-scribe,
and announced to
the assembly

and to us

that God is in our midst
this day.

Earth is holy now.

Anoint our being and doings,
Touch all our days,
with grace.

Let us honor this world
and its people.

On this Sunday of the Word of God in this Week of Christian Unity, let us be mindful that our words, our actions, our presence may be the only Gospel that another person reads. Let us be mindful that, among those with whom we live, we are the Gospel that the other person reads most often! We are the word of God together with all who are part of the sacred communion of all creation – the galaxies, the planets, the sun and the moon, the snow and the rain, the mountains and the rivers, the plants and insects, the animals wild and domestic, human persons. The word of God spoken in creation speaks today through all creation. Let us find our joy in the strength of our God!

GOD'S WORD ALIVE IN OUR WORLD

