

“The Mouth of Christ”

During this Lenten season, we are paying closer attention to The Body of Christ. It is not my intent to romanticize His Body — to give it attention as if *it* were the object of our affection. It is my intent to give due respect to that Biblical double-meaning of the phrase: “the Body of Christ,” referring of course to the physical manifestation of the incarnate Christ, but also recognizing that we, the Church, has been collectively referred to as “the Body of Christ.”

What does that mean for our living out our Christian calling? What can we learn from the ways that Christ used His Body that we might become the better at living as His Body in the world. Tonight we focus on The Mouth of Christ.

In the Gospel for this past Sunday, Matthew’s narrative of the Temptation of Our Lord, we heard our Lord respond to the temptation to turn stones into bread with the words of this evening’s First Lesson: “. . . ***one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.***”

It is important that we catch the context of those words. They come through Moses to the people of Israel in that section of Deuteronomy where God reiterates His covenant with the people. We focus primarily on this as a repeat of the Ten Commandments, but it goes beyond that. God does not just give orders; He creates a relationship. That is what covenant means — a two-way relationship. From God’s side comes the reminder of all that He has done for His people; from the human side should be forthcoming a response of obedience and gratitude.

In this context, God is reminding them how He had cared for them in their wilderness wanderings. Those forty years in the wilderness had been the result of unfaith — the people’s unwillingness to trust that God could do what God had promised to do. God promised that they could go in to possess the land; but when reports came back that the people who lived

there were powerful and their cities fortified, they despaired. They refused to go in. They refused to put God to the test of His own promise. [Aside: “You shall not test the Lord your God,” means that we don’t get to invent ways to make God prove Himself. But when it comes to God’s promises, we can follow the counsel of Martin Luther and “*shake God by the throat until He gives what He has promised.*”]

So, as He reminds them of how He cared and provided for them (“***The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell these forty years,***” He would go on to say) — in essence that He had not forgotten them — He encourages and warns them not to forget Him. But not just to remember the full bellies that manna and quail had made possible — God wants them (and they need) to remember His words.

It is sometimes easier to remember “stuff” than words. You likely (I say “likely” because I assume that you are like me in this) remember the gifts you got for your last birthday, but couldn’t repeat a single line from the cards that came with them (even allowing for the fact that the language in most greeting cards are insufferable pap, hardly worth remembering).

Now, if you more like me than is healthy for you, you have a hard time remembering the gifts — and in that we are like the people of Israel. They did indeed forget what God did for them. More to the point, they neglected the words He poured from His heart into their hearts. Which was death for them — as would warn every one of the prophets God sent again and again to warn them, to teach them, to alert them, to call them to a repentance they would not return.

When they returned from the Exile, they understood that forsaking God’s Word is dangerous. We may well argue that the system they devised to ensure against that happening again was not the answer (in part, because they came to worship the system more than the God whose Word they told themselves they were honoring).

So, when Jesus speaks these words to Satan in the midst of temptation, He is saying more than that we need to be familiar with God’s Word. He

is repeating this covenantal maxim: what truly gives us life is God's Word. There is no life apart from that Word. What comes forth from God's mouth is power and life.

In tonight's Gospel, we hear Jesus read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah these words:

***“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 favor.”***

Do you catch the importance of words attached to that Messianic description? “. . . to bring good news to the poor.” “. . . proclaim release to the captives . . .” and “to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” Apparently, the prophet Isaiah was led to believe (correctly, it turns out) that the Messiah would have something to say.

When Jesus goes on to declare, “***Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,***” He was putting the people of Nazareth — and us! — on notice that He would have something to say. Indeed, they recognized this almost immediately, for no sooner had He completed His speaking, Luke tells us, “***All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.***”

What did come forth from His mouth? St. John ends his Gospel with these words, “. . . ***there are . . . many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.***” That's addressing what Jesus did; how about what He said?

I won't try to capture everything (although we should become intimate with His words, if we are not so already!), but here is a representative sample:

“I am the light of the world; those who follow me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

“Let the children come to me and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.”

“I am the bread of life; those who come to me shall not hunger, and those who believe in me shall never thirst.”

He said to the paralytic, ***“Your sins are forgiven, rise and walk.”*** He walked.

He spoke to a storm, ***“Peace, be still.”*** And there was a great calm.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

He said to the woman caught in adultery, ***“Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.”***

“If any thirst, let them come to me and drink. All who believe in me, as the scripture has said, ‘Out of their hearts shall flow rivers of living water.’”

At the funeral procession for the only son of a widow at Nain, he said, ***“Young man, I say to you arise.”*** And the dead man sat up and began to speak.

“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

“I am the resurrection and the life; those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall not die forever.”

He stood outside the tomb of Lazarus and cried with a loud voice, ***“Lazarus, come out.”*** And the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages, and his face wrapped with a cloth.

“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In

my Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?"

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me."

Do you catch why He would want us to understand that we do ***"not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD"***? There is power in His Word. There is grace to be heard. There is hope generated and love shared. In the words that come from the mouth of the Lord is life.

Quoting the Psalms and the prophets, St. Paul reminds his readers in Rome of the truth that we often have seen but still have difficulty remembering. Let me comment on it I read it again: ***"There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God."*** (So much for remembering all that God has said and done!)

"All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one." (As a result, no one knows how to live, because there is a disconnect to the source of life.)

"Their throats are opened graves; they use their tongues to deceive." (Once that disconnect has happened, death is the result.)

"The venom of vipers is under their lips." (More death!)

"Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." (Because what else can come from people under the condemnation of death?)

"Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery are in their paths, and the way of peace they have not known." (Of course not! Without that word that comes from the mouth of the Lord, there is no way to know anything but this.)

"There is no fear of God before their eyes." (And doesn't *that* say a mouthful?)

Let us be clear: What comes from the mouth of Christ is life. What comes from any other source is death . . . maybe not immediate, instantaneous death . . . but death nonetheless, and all the more insidious for long, harried, inevitable spiral down into nothingness. So, we focus on the words that come from the mouth of the Lord.

It sounds so simple . . . it is simple . . . but I know it is not always easy. So many voices clamor for our attention. There are many of them to which we want to give heed: family, friend, employers, neighbors. There are many that we can't wait to turn off: politicians, certain celebrities, self-important windbags. But so many voices come to our ears with messages that sound soothing, calming, hopeful, pleasant, sweet, comforting. Promises are made, vistas displayed, visions shared — and much of it sounds delightful, good, truly promising. That is why we must give our ears to the mouth of the Lord.

At the end of His life, in the midst of His Passion and death, Jesus once more revealed the life-giving properties of what came forth from His mouth. On the cover of tonight's bulletin, we see our Lord being offered vinegar while on the cross. His opponents wanted Him to experience only the bitterness of His punishment.

But Jesus was true to His calling; the Messiah would ***“preach good news . . . proclaim release . . . proclaim . . . the Lord's favor.”*** The mouth of Christ spoke lovingly even from the cross. ***“Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.”*** To the thief crucified beside him he said, ***“Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”*** Lovingly providing for the needs of his mother at the time of his death, he spoke to her, ***“Behold your son.”*** And to the disciple whom he loved he said, ***“Behold your mother.”*** As he felt the pain of separation from God caused by our sin, he cried out, ***“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*** In order to fulfill the scripture, he said, ***“I thirst.”*** Then perfectly completing his mission, he said, ***“It is finished.”*** And finally showing and telling us not only, how to live but how to die, he said, ***“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”***

Loving words, forgiving words, caring words, words that speak into the heart of our pain and loneliness, despair and grief, words that comprehend human need, words that show us how to surrender to God — all these words come forth from the mouth of Christ. They are words of life. They are words that give us life.

And so we rejoice, for the mouth of Christ was not silenced forever by death. At the resurrection the words from his mouth were these: ***“Do not be afraid; go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.”*** At several appearances after his resurrection, the first words from his mouth were: ***“Peace be with you.”*** The mouth of Christ still brings us peace. The final promise from his mouth brings peace to all our troubles and all our days, ***“Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”***

And so we hear Him still, and must know, that it is not simply a statement about the general condition of the human race, but must also be true of each of us every day: We . . . WE ***“live by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”***

Amen.