

Lectors Are Not Just Readers

Welcome to you, fellow Catholic Christian, or fellow Christian from another religious tradition, and a special welcome to you who find yourself called to the high service of proclaiming the Living Word of God as Lector at the Sunday Liturgy or at Sunday Worship. Welcome also to you who, though not a Christian, are interested in the Word of God proclaimed as inspired by God in all the Christian churches. We will ponder here, in view of some difficult words God has spoken to his people and continues to speak to them today, the main difference between a simple reader and a lector of the Word of God.

It could be seen as a spontaneously natural thing for us not to like certain words God has spoken to his people and continues to speak to us today. Consider the Chosen People who told Moses they could not bear to hear the words God said about not touching the holy mountain on which He would meet Moses or they would die; even a cow or bull touching the base of the mountain would die. If we give in to our sensitivities, we could draw the conclusion that these troubling words of God need to be expunged from the readings we are given to proclaim during Mass, which readers are expected to proclaim, so as to spare our fellow parishioners the fear and trembling or abhorrence generated by these words. Take for example:

1. Dec. 25: first reading (Isaiah 9.2-4, 6-7), second paragraph:

*"You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, **as people exult when dividing plunder**"*

God picked the time and place in human history to interact with humanity, establish a relationship with them, and inspire Sacred Scriptures that would for all time contain and transmit immutable truths about God and about ourselves to future generations until the end of the world. Some may find the image of "people exulting when dividing plunder" offensive, but frankly, I find it at the very least honest and transparent. In those days conflicts between peoples and cities was part of life and they all needed to face up to it when it happened, and the people God chose as his own could indeed exult when He helped them survive and overcome their enemies and take home the spoils.

I prefer the honesty and transparency of a people defending themselves to survive, putting their trust in the Lord to give them strength, and taking home the scraps to the subtlety and sophistication to which we have developed in our own day the deliberate, callous, and unconscionable exploitation of others. We rip off millions, even billions, ruin countless lives, and contentedly return to our castles to enjoy the spoils of our extortion and deceit. All is well as long as we don't get caught. We subvert other nations, plot actions to provoke other peoples into committing the actions that will then justify us wiping them out..... The vast majority of us, good people that we are, cannot bear to become fully aware how much of what we have, enjoy, consume, and rely on comes from places where those who produce them are either exploited, or poorly paid or compensated, or have no hope of ever enjoying anything like the freedoms we take for granted....

No, I prefer the simplicity and honesty of the Bible to anything contemporary in our world today....

The Church in her wisdom receives from God his inspired Sacred Scriptures and will continue to proclaim them in Church until the Lord comes again in his glory. The Lord knows what He is doing, and it is up to us to use the brains He has given us and open ourselves to the interpretation and understanding the Holy Spirit is ready to give us, if only we remain open and docile, and don't let the literal words blind us to the truth they contain, or our natural impulses driven by original sin swell us with pride to think we know on our own without divine assistance what the Scriptures mean and reject with contempt those parts that don't make us comfortable or fail to affirm us in our understanding of things as they are on the basis of our own sensibilities. That is precisely what Genesis is all about, that the first human beings relied excessively on their own sensibilities, logic, and prideful understanding, rejecting all that God had revealed to them. We continue to suffer the consequences in our own flawed and limited understanding of creation and human life.

To plunder is to loot. The word conjures up in the mind the acts of attacking, killing, maiming, raping etc. followed by the looting of the property of the vanquished. One could feel that to evoke such a medieval and violent thought on Christmas night of all times, or for that matter at anytime in a Church, is deplorable. To further announce that people "*exult when dividing plunder*" is to render the thought even more offensive to any peace loving congregation. A reader on Christmas night could get stuck in this view of God's Word and not be able to read this word "plunder" and mumble it or clear the throat instead..... Another example:

2. January 25: first reading (Jonah 3.1-5, 10), paragraphs. 2 to 4:

*" Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, **"Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"** And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, **God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them: and he did not do it.**"*

If anyone threatens to bring a calamity on others he is looked upon as a terrorist and is looked upon as a menace to the peace and security of people in community. God is portrayed in the above reading as a threatening, punishing, destructive power and, in today's context, as a super-terrorist, a God of FEAR. Not of LOVE.

The threat of punishment is only understandable in light of the desired change in behaviour intended by the formulation of the threat to begin with. Parents afraid of appearing cruel who never threaten punishment to their children will raise precisely the kind of unconscious human being capable of becoming a terrorist.

When parents threaten punishment to their children they only do it in light of the greater danger consequent on their children's present bad behaviour, which if left unattended will corrupt their children and in time bear the poisonous fruit of a corrupted conscience and character. A punishment carried out in their eyes is a far more desirable pain for both parent and child than an evil outcome, which can have consequences into eternity and final damnation. I much prefer a parent, such as mine, who trampled their own sensitivities and were unafraid to threaten and then administer punishment of increasing severity as needed in order to correct or put a halt to dangerous sinful habits, attitudes and behaviours that in time would have borne bitter fruit and corrupted me as a person and perhaps even ruined my chances of experiencing eternal bliss.

God threatened the Ninevites by telling them in advance what would be the imminent consequences of their evil behaviour, and in light of their collective conscientious repentance, the disaster became superfluous; it no longer needed to happen, its cause was taken away at the root, and instead the Ninevites switched to behaviour that immediately began to bear fruit that was good, true, just, and sweet.

That's the kind of God I believe in and who inspires me. Spare me an unfeeling, impersonal "deus ex machina" who cares nothing for his creation and lets them be damned if that is what they want; they only get what they deserve. The second Person of the Blessed Trinity who took flesh in Jesus was the very same Person who spoke to Jonah and sent him to Nineveh. We know from Jesus that no one can know the Father, so He never speaks to anyone but the Son and it is the Son who makes the Father and his will known. So it was definitely the Son who spoke to the prophets and sent them all to his people with warnings of the dire consequences of their sin if they did not repent of them. When He did take flesh, the Son of God, having a flesh capable of suffering and dying, took on Himself the consequences of our sin to show us how odious sin is and to seduce our hardened sinful hearts with his passion; that we might soften up, repent, and turn back to our Father.

It is understandable that a reader may find harsh words in the Word of God embarrassing, but it would be a mistake and a failure to rise to the occasion and be truly a lector, a proclaimer of the Word of God to decline. If we are unwilling to hear or proclaim the full Word of God, then it is only a question of time before we shy away from attending Mass regularly and then at all.

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We would then be embarrassed by the wrong things. Jesus said to us that he who is ashamed of Him and his words, of him Jesus in his turn would be ashamed when that person comes before his Father. Why? Because that false shame would in effect represent Jesus' final failure with that person's conscience. Jesus came to bring us to feel shame for our own sin before we notice the sins of others, and to adopt humility before the goodness and justice of his Father's will. A Christian unwilling to hear and receive the Word of God in all its fullness has not yet come of age and is still, as St Paul said, on a diet of milk, only able to tolerate warmth, love, and comfort, like the little infant incapable of even hearing a harsh word, let alone any talk of punishment.

A lector unable or unwilling to adopt humility cannot possibly hear the Word of God in its fullness, and without trust in God cannot possibly accept as true God's threats of punishment, without which his love would not be sincere and complete as for any good parent; then, such a lector is not apt to proclaim the Word of God, not having the requisite minimum faith. Oh, that lector might read the word alright, but he or she would not be proclaiming the Word of God with the awe and wonder, fear and trembling, of which St. Paul spoke out of his own blessed experience. He or she would merely be a reader, and not a lector of the Word of God.

Yes, God is there all the time and He calls us to be there too. As the author of the letter to the Hebrews wrote so long ago, "Do not neglect the assembly as some do..." Heb 10:25, so must we, if we truly love the Lord, learn to value as more precious and necessary than anything else the Sunday Liturgy, the assembly of the saints of God, his people, the loving attendance of the Bride to her husband and bridegroom, Jesus, the Risen Lord, who has such love for her, for us, as to offer his own life, his Body and Blood, to nourish in us the divine life He naturally enjoys with his Father in the Holy Spirit. What could be of greater value than receiving Him? Once we receive Him into ourselves, He then accompanies us in all we do and raises it into the higher realms of the intense love and perfect goodness and justice that can only be found in the Blessed Trinity, our source, model, and destiny.

It is time that all of us God's children grow up to the full maturity of Jesus Christ and learn to tolerate the full message of the Good News, both the sweet and the bitter truths, and go from sucking milk to eating meat, that we may grow to full maturity and accept the full meaning of God's revelation to humanity through the salvation history of the Jewish and Chosen People culminating in the birth, life, ministry, miracles, parables, suffering, death, and resurrection of the Son of God and sending of the Holy Spirit, to remind us of all the things which Jesus said and taught, not just the ones we like to hear.

God bless you too, dear reader of these notes. If you have been, as at one time we all are, troubled by some of God's words to his people and to us, I hope you will be able to take this in and widen your understanding of the Word of God. Those who do not, but persist in wanting to expunge the parts of the Word of God they find unsavoury will show their unwillingness to receive or proclaim the Word of God and would be capable of only reading words. It would be better for them to refrain from attempting to proclaim the Word of God until they can receive from God the humility and faith necessary to accept the Word of God in its fullness as true.

It would be better for the congregation to have someone less able to read the words well, but who would do so with deep faith in those words and humble acceptance of God's will and loving trust in his mercy; for it is the faith, humility, and love which make the difference between a reader and a lector. In addition, another essential trait of the lector is faith and commitment to try daily to respond to the Word of God and follow Jesus in trying to do the will of God in one's life, to adopt the resolute will of Jesus to obey his Father. Although we are sinners and fall short every day, we rely on the mercy of God, confess our sins regularly, humbly receive into ourselves God's Divine Mercy given in Jesus, and every day start again to live the Word of God. This is a lector.

The faithful of God at St. Luke deserve to have lectors, not readers, let the Holy Spirit activate in their minds, hearts, souls, bodies, and spirits the holy truths God is speaking to them through the voice of the disciple offering his or her service in imitation of Jesus Himself, who came not to do his own will but that of his Father.

God bless you and your family.