

4th Sunday of the Year – Cycle B – 2009

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 7:32-35; Mark 1:21-28

"If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts" (Psalm 95)

When the psalmist spoke these words, he addressed the greatest obstacle to faith that plagues the human family, hardness of heart. The phrase begins with the word, "if;" "If you hear his voice." In today's world that is a big "if" because of the many things that would distract us from hearing God's word. It is not just our own personal sin that prevents us from hearing God's voice. We also are unable to hear God's voice because of the many other voices that are screaming for our attention. "Freedom of Choice," "buy this car and you will have happiness," "success is measured by the amount of money you make," are but a few of the hundreds of voices we hear day after day; voices that clamor for our attention, that demand our time and talent, that sap us of our energy.

It is no different today than it was at the time of Jesus. The religious zealots, the Roman rulers, the people all trying to make a buck, all shouted together trying to drown each other out. Add to this the empty words of the scribes and Pharisees, quoting the laws and teachings, but not really having these words inscribed in their hearts, and you have quite a noisy din trying to capture people's attention.

In the midst of all this chaos and noise of the world, came a man named Jesus. When he spoke his words had authority. People sat up and listened because he wasn't just quoting the words of others, he was speaking as the voice of God, because he was God. In the person of Jesus the Word of God became flesh and blood. It became real and therefore it had the ability to change people's hearts.

This is what God intended when he gave us the Word. Earlier in Deuteronomy we read: *"and these words I command you today shall be in your heart . . . teach them to your children . . . talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and gates,"* (6:6-9). The word is connected to sitting and walking, to lying down and rising up. It is on our hand, between our eyes; it marks our comings and goings. It is intended to be all encompassing of our lives, guiding and directing our every word, choice and action.

But we don't always want to hear the word of God, because to hear God's word very often means we must change our ways. But we don't want to change our ways. We would rather stay in our patterns of brokenness and self-centeredness. A theologian by the name of Elizabeth Johnson has coined a word to describe all of this. She says it is "scotosis," or a hardening of the mind against unwanted wisdom. We oftentimes don't want to learn more about our faith, about God, because it means we would have to change our way of thinking. We don't always want to change our way of thinking because it might mean we have to reevaluate our lifestyles and give up those things that distract us from Jesus.

But isn't this why Jesus came into the world? Didn't he come to save us from our sins? Didn't he come to reveal to us the knowledge and love of God?

Knowledge and love of God begins first with God. God chooses to reveal himself to us and through the waters of baptism we are given eyes of faith and Jesus, the Word of God, becomes planted in our hearts. Our lived faith then becomes a response to that word that is planted in our hearts. It is important to nurture this faith through a careful and deliberate choice to learn more about the faith. Here at Nativity there are ample opportunities for adults to learn about their faith. This begins first with parents forming their children in the ways of faith through our Catholic School and Faith Formation program. This is why we require that parents take an active role in their faith development of their children. By so doing you parents learn more about the faith that has been passed down to you.

In addition to this we have many adult Faith Formation opportunities through our scripture study courses, our book reads, classes on Vatican II, and the upcoming six week Lenten Retreat based on the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius. Each of these things requires that we dedicate some of our time. This probably means that some other thing might have to be given up in order that you can make the time you need for these experiences.

It is important also to nurture this faith through an active sacramental life. Each time we come to this altar we are fed by both the Word and the Body and Blood of Christ. This is given to us to enlighten us, and to sustain and nourish us for the coming week. Like faith, the Eucharist is a pure gift of grace given us by God. Our hearts and minds must be open to these graces for them to have the greatest effect in our lives.

We live in a world that is increasingly placing demands on us for our time and our attention. Daily we are bombarded with the news from around the world, the constant drone of sales pitches to buy more things, and the mind-numbing entertainment that comes into our homes through our television sets. We need to consciously block out these things that clamor for our attention so that we can be attentive to the voice of God calling us into deeper union. One very excellent way to do this is to mark out quiet time each and every day. One great source of this is the Catholic practice of Eucharistic Adoration, spending time in the presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist. Each Monday and early Tuesday morning we hold Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament in our daily mass Chapel. We invite you all to come and experience this rich devotional practice. This coming Monday evening, at 7 p.m., I will be offering a presentation on this ancient practice of devotion.

Quieting our minds from the noise of the world and focusing our hearts and minds through our practice of faith allows the Word of God to become woven and integrated into our entire life. The Word is given opportunity to not only be put into our heads. It also is placed on our hearts. Then our hearts can be moved, molded, and changed into the hearts that God has placed within each of us. Then we can truly know and love God, just as we can know and love one another.

So today, in this Eucharist, let us pray that God will remove any hardness of heart which prevents us from knowing him. Let us pray that we will not just know things about God, but that we will truly come to love God with all our hearts.

"If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts."