

SUNDAY OF THE WORD OF GOD

HOLY MASS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

*St. Peter's Basilica
Sunday, 24 January 2021*

[Multimedia]

[Archbishop Rino Fisichella read the homily Pope Francis had prepared for the occasion]

On this Sunday of the Word, let us listen to Jesus as he proclaims the Kingdom of God. Let us consider *what* he says and *to whom* he says it.

What does he say? Jesus begins his preaching with these words: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand" (*Mk* 1:15). God is near, that is the first message. His kingdom has come down to earth. God is not, as we are often tempted to think, distant, up in heaven, detached from the human condition. No, he is in our midst. The time of his distance ended when, in Jesus, he became man. Ever since then, God has been very close to us; he will never retire from our human condition or tire of it. This closeness is the very first message of the Gospel; today's reading tells us that Jesus "was saying" (v. 15) those words: he *kept repeating them*. "God is near" was the leitmotif of his preaching, the heart of his message. If this was the opening theme and the refrain of all Jesus' preaching, it must necessarily be the one constant of the Christian life and message. Before all else, we must believe and proclaim that God has drawn near to us, that we have been forgiven and shown mercy. Prior to every word of ours *about* God, there is his word to us, his Word who continues to tell us: "Do not be afraid, I am with you. I am at your side and I will always be there".

The word of God enables us to touch this closeness, since – as the Book of Deuteronomy tells us – it is not far from us, it is *near* to our hearts (cf. 30:14). It is the antidote to our fear of having to face life alone. Indeed, by his word the Lord *consoles* us, that is, he stands "with" (*con-*) those who are "alone" (*sol/i*). In speaking to us, he reminds us that he has taken us to heart, that we are precious in his eyes, and that he holds us in the palm of his hand. God's word infuses this peace, but it does not *leave us in peace*. It is a word of consolation but also a call to conversion. "Repent", says Jesus, immediately after proclaiming God's closeness. For, thanks to his closeness, we can no longer distance ourselves from God and from others. The time when we could live thinking only of ourselves is now over. To do so is not Christian, for those who experience God's closeness cannot ignore their neighbours or treat them with indifference. Those who hear God's word are constantly reminded that life is not about shielding ourselves from others, but about encountering them in the name of God who is near. The word sown in the soil of our hearts, leads us in turn *to sow hope through closeness to others*. Even as God has done with us.

Let us now consider *to whom* Jesus speaks. His first words are to Galilean fishermen, simple folk who lived by harsh manual labour, by day and night. They were no experts in Scripture or people of great knowledge and culture. They lived in a region made up of various peoples, ethnic groups and cults: one that could not have been further from the religious purity of Jerusalem, the heart of the country. Yet that is where Jesus began, not from the centre but from the periphery, and he did so in order to tell us too that no one is far from God's heart. Everyone can receive his word and encounter him in person. The Gospel offers a nice detail in this regard, when it tells us that Jesus' preaching came "after" that of John (*Mk* 1:14). That word *after* is decisive: it points to a difference. John received people in the desert, where only those able to leave their homes could go. Jesus, on the other hand, speaks of God in the heart of society, to everyone, wherever they find themselves. He does not speak at fixed times or places, but "walking along the shore", to fishermen who were "casting their nets" (v. 16). He speaks to people in the most ordinary times and places. Here we see the *universal power* of the word of God to reach everyone and every area of life.

Yet the word of God also has *particular power*, that is, it can touch each person directly. The disciples would never forget the words they heard that day on the shore of the lake, by their boats, in the company of their family members and fellow workers: words that marked their lives forever. Jesus said to them: "Follow me, I will make you become fishers of men" (v. 17). He did not appeal to them using lofty words and ideas, but spoke to their lives. He told fishermen that they were to be fishers of men. If he had told them: "Follow me, I will make you Apostles, you will be sent into the world to preach the Gospel in the power of the Spirit; you will be killed, but you will become saints", we can be sure that Peter and Andrew would have answered: "Thanks, but we'll stick to our nets and our boats!" But Jesus spoke to them in terms of their own livelihood: "You are fishermen, and you will become fishers of men". Struck by those words, they come to realize that lowering their nets for fish was too little, whereas putting out into the deep in response to the word of Jesus was the secret of true joy. The Lord does the same with us: he looks for us where we are, he loves us as we are, and he patiently walks by our side. As he did with those fishermen, he waits for us on the shore of our life. With his word, he wants to change us, to invite us to live fuller lives and to put out into the deep together with him.

So dear brothers and sisters, let us not ignore God's word. It is a love letter, written to us by the One who knows us best. In reading it, we again hear his voice, see his face and receive his Spirit. That word brings us close to God. Let us not keep it at arm's length, but carry it with us always, in our pocket, on our phone. Let us give it a worthy place in our homes. Let us set the Gospel in a place where we can remember to open it daily, perhaps at the beginning and at the end of the day, so that amid all those words that ring in our ears, there may also be a few verses of the word of God that can touch our hearts. To be able to do this, let us ask the Lord for the strength to turn off the television and open the Bible, to turn off our cell phone and open the Gospel. During this liturgical year, we are reading Saint Mark, the simplest and the shortest of the Gospels. Why not read it at home too, even a brief passage each day. It will make us feel God's closeness to us and fill us with courage as we make our way through life.