

Towards the Sunday of the Word of God 2022
LISTENING TO WORDS OF LIFE
TO LIVE AS HUMAN BEINGS

To read the biblical texts in today's life

by Ernesto Borghi

Word of God Sunday was instituted two years ago, certainly to encourage authentic attention to the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures primarily by members of the Catholic Church. What does “authentic attention” mean? This adjective has a precise meaning: “authentic” means seeking to know, as far as possible, biblical texts and values in real relation to what they have meant, in the contexts from which they derive, and what they can say to the culture and life of us, men and women of the 21st century in so many different parts of planet Earth.

In this regard, we need to consider an important fact. In this era of the Covid-19 pandemic, a remarkable and, at times, truly embarrassing distinction has become clear, from the North to the South, from the East to the West of the world:

- on the one hand there have been and there are those who have given and give fundamental importance to the dissemination of the knowledge of biblical texts and values as an important celebratory, educational and formative moment to try to be disciples of the God of Jesus Christ;

- On the other hand, we have noticed those who have thought and think that only liturgical rites, the celebrations of the sacraments are relevant for Christian faith and life and that, when these celebrations cannot be lived as they have always been done, nothing valid is really achievable under the educational, formative, in short, existential Christian and, specifically, Christian Catholic profile.

Listening existentially to the biblical Scriptures means something simple and complex at the same time: relating what emerges as beautiful and good from these

ancient words to one's own daily life in order to draw inspiration towards choices that make one as capable as possible of living in the image and likeness of Jesus Christ and his love.

For many centuries listening, in relationship with the biblical scriptures, was more important and widespread than personal reading. Until a few decades ago in the North of the world and still in various parts of the South of our planet, a large part of the population could not read. Therefore, elites of people had a direct relationship with the biblical texts, however partial and questionable, as exclusive interpreters instead of many of their contemporaries. Particularly in the Catholic sphere, until a few decades ago, the fact that someone - even if it was a candidate for the priesthood - had an edition of the Bible in his hands, made him look at it with suspicion. Why? Among the fundamental reasons was certainly a basic ignorance of the relevance of the biblical scriptures for the inner and social growth of people and the prejudice that a widespread direct relationship with the biblical texts was very un-Catholic.

The latter condition is, in many environments and places, certainly only a memory, but the lack of knowledge, at a global level, of first and New Testament texts and values still remains rather endemic. For this reason too, celebrating the Third Sunday of the Word of God seems increasingly useful as a specific opportunity to place one of the two essential points of reference of the Christian faith, namely the biblical Scriptures, at the centre of attention first and foremost of all those who are members of the Catholic Church.

In this third edition of Word of God Sunday, existential listening to the Scriptures is the theme chosen for serious and passionate reflection on faith, and thus on the life of every person, from children to the elderly, in relation to the revelation of the God of Sinai and Jesus Christ.

The readings of this Sunday's celebration, taken from the book of Nehemiah, from the First Letter to the Corinthians and from the Gospel according to Luke, are certainly very different from each other, but they make it very clear how much direct existential listening to the biblical texts, that is, attention capable of directing the

everyday life, is possible for everyone. Adrian Graffy, in his previous talk, offered some useful observations that help us to analyse in particular the texts of the first and third readings for next Sunday. Taking into account what he has told us, let us consider together some aspects that emerge directly from these biblical passages and from the splendid passage from chapter 12 of Paul's first letter to the community of Corinth.

- Reading the text from Nehemiah 8, we can ask ourselves: are the fundamental contents of the first five books of the Bible foundational for the life of those who are Jews and Christians? Undoubtedly yes, and the vitalising listening to these perspectives stimulates a framework of intense and humanising social relationships between those who welcome them day after day, as the speaker at the end of the text concretely invites us to do. As the Swiss biblical Prof. Renzo Petraglio reminds us in introducing the reading of this passage for the "Kamenge" Youth Centre in Bujumbura, Burundi, *"Joy, the fact that God rejoices in his people, is what moves people to act, to share their food with those who have none, and to rejoice"*.

- The text of 1 Corinthians 12 speaks of the relevance of the multiple capacities that the individual members of the Christian community receive from God for the sake of spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ with a view to a beautiful and good life for all. These are gifts that activate activities of service in respect of which none has greater dignity than the others with respect to living fraternal love within the communities themselves and from the communities to the outside world. It is a question of listening to the divine Spirit, which directs one towards a life of solidarity, in which the gifts received by each one, starting with the ability to proclaim the Gospel, are lived for the benefit of all, without any kind of arrogance or sectarianism.

- Do the Hebrew Bible/First Testament provide indications and proclamations of liberation from evil and from all forms of material and spiritual slavery? Evidently yes, at the moment when the Lucan Jesus affirms that this process of widespread good begins to take place through his presence, in the context of Palestine of the first

century A.D., and absolutely depends on the ability to listen to these words of liberation, which is addressed to anyone who opens his heart, and therefore his life, to such a listening.

If everything we have said so far is true, that is, it is faithful to a fundamental meaning emerging from the biblical words considered, how is it possible to start from texts like these to structure formative meetings that help the comparison with the texts themselves and the dialogue between them and the life and culture of those who read them today? The grant published by the Pontifical Council for the New Evangelisation also offers valuable suggestions in this direction. And certainly those who are listening to us are well aware that every formation situation has particular needs, in terms of the recipients, their biblical competence and their living conditions, such that it is necessary to interpret in a specific way what I propose. I believe that, for a training meeting, from the Bible to everyday life, the methodological steps can be four

- initial brainstorming on a single theme, starting from the identity and condition of those present.

- In a biblical text that wants to place the relationship with the Torah at the centre of the participants' attention, as can be done from Nehemiah 8 (considering, an important question could be this: what importance does reading the Bible have for your life today? And, in particular, are the ten words (= the ten commandments) significant?

- In the case of the text of 1 Corinthians 12, the initial question could be twofold: do I have any particular gifts that others recognise? If I have this gift or gifts, do I make them available to others?

- If Luke 4:16-21 is the subject of the meeting (but rightly so, as Adrian Graffy has pointed out, it would be scientifically and culturally very appropriate to consider vv. 16 to 30 of Luke 4, without breaking up the text), the initial questions for comparison might be these: Do I listen to texts that are important for my daily life? If so, which ones? Have they changed me or do they change my life?

- After having created a sort of common denominator among those present with the initial questions, we move on to the reading of the chosen biblical text. The person coordinating the meeting provides very little contextual information and reads the passage aloud. At the end of this reading, the participants are given two simple questions to help them analyse and interpret the text: *What strikes me about this passage? What do I not understand in this passage?*

In the next ten minutes or so, everyone is invited to reread the text, letting themselves be challenged by these questions. In the following 10 to 15 minutes, those who wish to do so can ask questions and express opinions based on the reading, all of which are collected by the person coordinating the meeting.

- In the following half hour, the person coordinating the meeting proposes a reading of the text in question, taking into account what has emerged so far from the other participants in the meeting. It is a reading that proposes the most relevant elements of the passage in an analytical way, without going into technical details, but allowing a serious understanding of the fundamental meanings;

- At the end of the consideration of the text itself, the coordinator of the meeting presents some questions for comparison between what has emerged from the reading of the biblical text itself and the current needs and problems. The relationship with the Torah from listening to the text to sharing life with others, the relationship between charisms, ministries and activities in Christian communities, the attention to the liberation from evil of many people through the solidarity of other people can be the nuclei of value from which to imagine and propose questions to the participants. Obviously, more than ever, the conception of these questions is more or less effective depending on the acuity with which the coordinator knows how to find points of comparison between the texts themselves and significant issues and conditions in current culture and life. And anyone among the participants can make a contribution, proposing emphases that can complete and enrich what has been presented so far. The meeting is concluded or not by a reflection by the person who coordinated it.

A moment of prayer can introduce the meeting and/or conclude it, depending on the context in which it is organised and the prevailing physiognomy of those taking part.

In about 90 minutes this meeting can take place, which in itself is unlikely to introduce any particular changes in the formative/educational relationship between the biblical texts and the people involved, but which, if repeatedly planned in cycles of meetings over the course of months and years, considerably increases the biblical-existential sensitivity and the cultural quality of the Christian faith of many people.

I don't think I said anything particularly original or new. But I think they are useful and constructive suggestions on an educational level.

In liturgical moments, direct confrontation with the biblical texts is mediated by the person giving the homily and there are no moments in which those present can verbalize what they are thinking and feeling in relation to the biblical texts. But on all occasions when catechesis is given, and in various other circumstances when formation is given, both in the liturgical and charitable/social spheres, this should increasingly be the fundamental way in which these formative-educational moments are organised and lived.

I say this both thinking concretely of the ever more evident importance of making the entire ordinary pastoral action of the Catholic Church biblical, and knowing, like many of those who are listening to us, that the Christian faith will be able to arouse attention even in many environments not of Christian or religious inspiration if formative occasions are created that provide free keys to interpretation and stimuli with respect to the extraordinary treasure of beauty and goodness that the biblical Scriptures offer.

How? *If read with critical intelligence and educational passion, without fundamentalism and moralism of any kind.*

Where? *In all ecclesial environments and in many contexts of contemporary human societies.*

There is no need for the devotionism and authoritarianism of the past and of certain circles today, if we want to contribute to the liberating future of the Christian faith for all. And this will be increasingly possible if we learn to listen to the Word of God contained in the biblical books essentially with our lives... The prologue of the Gospel according to Luke, as Adrian Graffy has also mentioned, is found at the beginning of this Sunday's Gospel reading. Reading these four verses reminds us that in listening to and reading the texts, the recipients - the Theophiles of today as well - must never forget that what comes to their ears is the fruit of an ancient work of comparison, choice, interpretation of testimonies on the life of the crucified and resurrected Nazarene that require further interpretation and an ever more intelligent and passionate comparison with the existence of each one of us, women and men, listeners, readers of the 21st century, and of those who will come after us.

No one among the women and men who have lived in the past and are living today is an ultimate Master in this perspective of existential listening to the biblical Scriptures. We are all disciples, pupils and students, whatever our state of life. Of course we may be more or less competent and equipped on a technical and cultural level, but we can always help each other along this road of inner and social, personal and collective deepening. For the good of each and every one of us, in the Church of Jesus Christ, in its various confessional articulations, and in the whole world. Let us try to think about it and...good listening to all of you!

FOR PERSONAL AND COMMUNITY MEDITATION

by Renzo Petraglio

* The book of Nehemiah has helped us to discover that you, Lord, are not a judge who condemns; you are a God who rejoices in us. This is the fundamental discovery of our life, the discovery that moves us to share our life and our bread with others. Let us never forget that "the joy of the Lord" is our strength!

* We are one body, that is Paul's message. We must therefore respect each other deeply. For only by respecting each other - in our social, ethnic and religious differences - do we respect the work of the Spirit, the one Spirit from whose wellspring "we have drunk". And only in this way do we respect "the body of Christ" of which we are each and every one members.

* Luke has shown us that Jesus is the one who brings the good news to the poor. He is the one who can heal and set free those "who are irreparably wounded". Help us, Lord, to put our trust in you and to put your word into practice, instead of following talkers who talk and say nothing. Help us, Lord, to see how your word is truly fulfilled in our lives.