

Father O'Connor's Homily for 1 September 2024
Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Sunday-B

Deuteronomy 4: 1-2, 6-8
James 1: 17-18, 21b-22, 27
Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

In today's Gospel passage from Saint Mark, Jesus is being criticized by the Pharisees and Scribes. He responds to them by quoting the prophet Isaiah: "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." And then Saint James teaches us in today's second reading: "Be doers of the Word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves."

Preaching the Word of God is a mighty responsibility, and I accept this ministry with a great deal of trepidation and prayer. Our world offers a lot of messages that try to "elbow out" the Word of God. One of these ideas is that psychology can take the place of God. Now psychology and therapy are good and helpful things. But they don't replace our need for God.

"Psychologizing" the Gospel reduces discipleship to self-esteem. It reduces sin to maladjustment. It reduces the Church to group therapy. And it reduces Jesus our Savior to a cosmic "Dear Abby."

Jesus did minister to people by comforting them and encouraging them, as the Scriptures testify. But Jesus did not come to our world simply to help us feel better about ourselves, and then leave us just as we were. He came to save us from our sins and to offer us the gift of eternal happiness in heaven – where this world's fear and anxiety and unrest are no more.

His Holy Word, the Bible, is gifted to us not simply to be heard, but to be taken to heart: to convert us, to change us, to detoxify us from the wages of sin.

We come to church not only for comfort but also for the truth that will set us free. And God's truth calls us to personal honesty, to confession of our sins and to ongoing conversion. Listen again to Jesus when He says: "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." And then to Saint James: "Be doers of the Word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves."

I ask you now to think of a time in your life when someone disappointed you. When perhaps you had a dream and needed their cooperation to accomplish it, and they let you down. Maybe what really disappointed you was that their heart was not with yours.

Now, imagine how the Lord feels about our lack of cooperation with Him in fulfilling His dreams for us – that we become even better versions of ourselves – when instead we only honor Him with our lips but our hearts are far from Him.

When we listen to God’s Word, our first question should always be: “Lord, what are you saying to me right now?” And not: “Lord, what has all this got to do with anything?”

And so, I have a huge responsibility each week – in fact, each day – in preaching God’s Holy Word. My charge is not to tame God’s Word into being “user-friendly.” It is not to package it in a small attractive gift box – like that is all there is to it. It is not to enclose God’s Word in a little cage like people do with their pets when they take them on airplanes.

My responsibility is to unleash God’s Word – to allow God to get to me – and to you. To allow God to get into our hearts, so that we are not simply listeners, but that our hearing leads us to be doers of His Word.

“Lord, what are you saying to me right now?”

Hear these inspired words once again. Jesus says: “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” And Saint James continues: “Be doers of the Word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves.”

If you take these lines from God’s Word into your own heart right now, you will have heard plenty from this preacher today. The next step is yours. To allow God, to invite God to take care of the rest.