

The Word of the Lord.

This phrase we say at the end of Bible readings, about the whole Bible, about what God might be saying to us is a deep and mysterious phrase. It was the Words of the Lord that made the creation in the account in the beginning of Genesis. The psalms say that the Word of the Lord makes the mountains shake and strips the cedars of Lebanon. To the old prophets the Word of the Lord came and they heard what was said. "The Word of the Lord" appears 225 times in the Bible, and in the New Testament it means the teaching about Jesus, the Christ.

One of the places I am drawn to is Isaiah 55 where the Lord says "so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."

I want to think about this phrase we use so often, and therefore, often without much thought.

I have a book I read a page from every now and then. Called "the Art of Pastoring" by William Martin it is full of quirky wisdom. Of "The Word" it says this...

The Word is the eternal feminine
the source of all life
giving birth to new wonders
at all times.
And the pastor is the midwife
who brings comfort and encouragement
to all who are in labour.

Of all the things I know about The Word this idea of the Word of God being somehow implanted in us, impregnated in us, as something coming to life in us, this is the most helpful. It brings all the sayings together and helps me begin to comprehend them more.

My youngest son, Ben, is in Nova Scotia. His Summer job is tree planting. He sets off into the wilds where the old trees have all been taken, and the earth is recovering, and he plants new trees. He has four great bags strapped to him, like a postal worker carrying letters, but bigger, I think. And in these bags are trees. They come in long strips of 100 wrapped in a papery web that tears easily, but has rooting powder and good stuff like that on it. His job is to seek out good ground, plunge his shovel blade in and open a crack of earth, then drop a single baby tree into it. He pulls the shovel out and the cut in the earth closes back and the top of the baby tree sticks up. He does this lots of times. He is paid by the tree!

The seed of a plant, the sapling of a tree, is planted, to reforest the hillsides.
"So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."
Ben's planting is inspected to see that it will bring forth trees. They will accomplish what is desired and achieve the purpose for which they were sent out.

When someone stands here to read from the Bible they end by saying "The word of the Lord" and we respond, "Thanks be to God". This resembles "Here's your supper." "Oh, thanks very much!"

It implies we are receiving something we desire and need and from which we will benefit. We don't say "Thanks" to the reader, but to God, because this little exchange is there to teach us that we are receiving the reading not only from from Laurie or Brenda or Kelly-Anne, but from God.

The reader, if we listen well, opens a little slip into which s/he, and the Lord, slip a Word of the Lord, and then they walk away from the lectern, and the soul closes over it with the Word left in it.

And when you read and pray, each time you turn to God consciously, you open a slip of your soul with the invitation to the Lord to drop some small Word in. A word of comfort or of peace in times of anxiety and trouble. A word of hope for a lost child or ring. A word of help for a trial to be faced, chemo to be withstood or an interview to succeed. That is why when we pray, the Church teaches us also to read some Holy Scripture, believing God will speak to us through it.

But there is a responsibility for us. We are asked to look for the Word of the Lord, and to ponder it, to prepare for it and to nurture it. We are, Like Mary, asked to carry something of God and bring it to birth in our lives.

Jesus taught that the Word of the Lord is like seed that a sower went out to sow. It is scattered over the earth. There is hard earth, weedy earth, rocky, shallow soil, and trampled soil, and there is good, rich, deep, watered, sunlit earth.

I wonder about how the Word of the Lord finds the soil of my soul. I work with Holy Scripture. I read the Bible professionally. This is a privilege and it is a risk. "Familiarity breeds contempt" goes the adage. It is easy for me to know the readings too well, to speed over the text and to see it as words which must be preached from. But I know that I have to read the readings early in the week, in my prayer times, and let them sit, like seeds in damp soil, and wait for something to germinate.

The spiritual life is about sitting, letting things germinate. It is about paying attention to movement, growth and nurturing. It begins as introspection, as prayer, as holding the Word, the source of all life. It is based in believing that God is seeking to give birth to new wonders, at all times.

My job as pastor is to be a sort of midwife, both to myself, and to you. We have to bring comfort and encouragement to all who are in labour.

And if we believe what we say about "The Word of the Lord" and "Thanks be to God", then we are, like a Nova Scotia hillside, or a woman noticing a slight tremor of change within her body, bring to birth something for God, the Father of all creation.

Last Saturday I spent 2 hours with Gina our secretary and Melvin her husband. Their joy is in mission work among young overseas students in Canada. They offer "English as a second language" courses, and meanwhile are open about their faith. In that faith they offer community and friendship and welcome to young people far from home. They held a BBQ and there were games. I played games which I haven't played for 30 years. Friendships were the main aim of the day. But they were also scattering seeds of a love which is unearned but freely given, a welcome that is sincere and open, and the willingness to explain why strangers should offer care and open hospitality without profit in mind. We wonder about our call to outreach and evangelism. Gina and Melvin opened my eyes to one way it works. It begins in tiny seeds of hope, scattered in faith, with no expectation of immediate benefit to us, but in hope of benefit to others.

The Word of the Lord is, like tiny fir trees, being offered to empty ground. We water it, in others, and in ourselves, with prayer and love.