TOWARDS A PARISH SPIRITUALITY OF THE WORD OF GOD

MICHAEL TRAINOR

IT IS THURSDAY morning. I am the non-resident priest moderator of the parish of Elizabeth, South Australia, and I’ve come for the weekly meeting with the parish pastoral team.

Elizabeth is about fifty kilometres north of Adelaide. I live forty-five minutes closer to the city with a full-time ministry of teaching at our Catholic Theological College, a member college of the school of theology at Flinders University. I make this journey to Elizabeth at least twice a week. On Saturday night and Sunday morning I preside at the parish celebrations of the Eucharist, staying overnight on Saturdays with a retired priest who lives in the area.

When I arrive on this particular Thursday and before the meeting, I join the pastoral team and other parishioners in the church for the Liturgy of the Word, led by one of our parishioners. This is the regular weekday Liturgy. Some of the parishioners are slowly warming to it though most would still prefer daily Mass.

A few years back this one parish was once two. But the gradual decline in numbers of priests in active ministry, their ageing and retirement precipitated the need by the leadership of the diocese to respond as best it could to this dawning moment. It adopted the pastoral strategies of parish twinning and amalgamation—not unusual responses in the Australian Catholic Church. As a result, the parish of Elizabeth was created, amalgamating two parishes, closing two Mass centres and rationalizing Sunday Mass times. The forging of this new parish occurred not without its pain, struggles and attrition. Elizabeth is now one of the largest Catholic parishes in the diocese in one of the most socially and economically challenging urban settings in Australia. Not long after its creation I was appointed as parish moderator together with a permanent deacon and pastoral director.

On this Thursday and after the Gospel the leader of the Liturgy of the Word offers a few reflections about the readings. The notes in her hands indicate that she has spent a great deal of time mulling over the readings and putting together some thoughts. I am encouraged by her courage and openness to reflect on this morning’s scripture readings. After an accompanying silence, the prayers of intercession, ‘Our Father’ and Sign of Peace follow. A final prayer and blessing conclude this simple liturgical event in a refashioned urban parish.

In this new historical moment in the pastoral and liturgical life in Australian Catholic parishes, more celebrations of the Liturgy of the Word will occur during the week in our churches, with the central focus of a parish’s liturgical life falling on Sunday celebrations of the Eucharist. This is the Sacred Assembly when parishioners experience the ‘source and summit’ of Catholic life. But in this in-between time, as we move from daily Mass to weekday Liturgies of the Word, with the heart of the celebrations of the Eucharist reserved for our Sunday gatherings, we are invited to reclaim an authentic spirituality of the Word of God. Though Vatican II reminded us of the
four-fold presence of Jesus in the Liturgy (Eucharist, the minister, the Word and the Assembly) our post-reformation history has tended to emphasise the first two (Eucharist and minister) at the expense of a deep appreciation of Jesus’ presence in the Word and the assembly of the baptized that gathers.

I would like to offer a foundation for renewing the Word and reclaiming its centrality within a parish setting, what I am naming a ‘spirituality of the Word.’ By ‘spirituality’ I mean the intentional formation of Catholics through biblical education and liturgical experiences through which parishioners grow in biblical literacy and become imbued with the Word in a way that their lives are deeply nourished. Their ‘spirit,’ that experience of God’s self-revelation to them, is profoundly enlarged. Or, using a different but perhaps more familiar expression, they know themselves to be ‘graced.’ I shall say more of this later when I explore the meaning of the expression, the Word of God.’

The following essay falls into four parts. In the first I explore the Bible’s meaning of ‘Word.’ In the second, I offer a summary of the renewal in the Word found in Catholic Teaching with its most recent expression in the October 2008 Synod of Bishops. In a third part I look at the meaning of the ‘Word of God’ borrowing from the insights of one Catholic biblical scholar, Sandra Schnieders. In a concluding section I suggest a way of praying the Word and, drawing on the Synod, some practical suggestions for fostering a parish spirituality of the Word.

The ‘Word’ in the Bible

The ancient Israelites knew that the first and immediate indicator of someone being alive was their breathing. Breath was life. They also knew that how people breathed indicated what was happening within them. In this sense, breath connected to a person’s personality and inner life. But the ancients also observed the solidifying phenomena of breath on a cold morning. The Israelites thus linked breath (ruach in Hebrew) to life, interiority, personality. Ruach was associated with a person yet strangely capable of independent existence. The same word, ruach, translated our understanding of ‘breath’ and ‘spirit.’ Ruach provided the Israelites with one of their central ideas for understanding God. God’s ‘breath’ or ‘spirit’ transmitted God’s life, expressed God’s interiority, was intimately linked to God yet capable of independent existence. God’s ruach preserved divine transcendence while at the same time enabled God to be imminent within creation and human beings. The world came into being through God’s ‘breath.’

For the Israelites, then, breath, the basis of ‘word,’ the sound made in inter-personal contact, had a dynamic quality that both communicated and brought about activity and being. The spoken word (in Hebrew dabar) which relied upon ruach was the means of this communication. Dabar was also an activity that had influential communicative and dynamic qualities. In summary, every dabari was a ‘word-deed.’

We all know the experience of hearing a word from another and having that word, a sound uttered by another, create an enormous response in us. This response might be one of delight, love, sadness or anger. Here we come close to the Israelite appreciation of dabar as word-deed. Their biblical writings presume this understanding:

- In Genesis 1, God creates by means of the dabar, the word-deed. When God says, ‘Let there be light’ (Gen 1:3), light is created.
God’s spoken word is effective. The creative effectiveness of God’s word-deed is further celebrated in many of the Psalms (e.g., Ps 33) and the Book of Wisdom.

- The biblical prophets saw themselves as communicators of God’s word-deed. Their speech reminded the Israelites of the essence of Torah teaching. Their prophetic utterances brought them to a spirit of conversion to the Torah and justice for the poor. Whether people welcomed or rejected the prophets’ *dabar*, their word communicated affectively. A powerful and revealing example of the prophet’s *dabar* is found in Ezekiel 37:1-14.

The prophet Ezekiel spoke God’s *dabar* in a time of the Israelite exile in the 7th century BCE. Ezekiel’s *dabar* was a word of hope and restoration for the people. In Ez 37 the prophet finds himself in a valley of dried bones, a visionary symbol of the Israelites’ status in Exile. As he speaks God’s word and releases God’s *ruach* into the valley and on to the bones, they come to life, knit or ‘clatter’ together to form human bodies and be released from their graves. The key moment in the prophecy is God’s request to Ezekiel to speak God’s *dabar* over the bones. This prophetic act brings about God’s *ruach*. The dynamic response to the action of God’s word in this valley of dry bones is a symbol of the power of God to bring the Israelites from Exile into their own land. Within our contemporary ecclesial setting and in the context of this reflection on the spirituality of the Word, Ez 37 is a metaphor for the power of God’s Word within the local parish community.

Then God said to me, ‘Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.’ So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.”

God’s Word spoken through the prophet creates a community from something that seems utterly lifeless. The prophetic utterance gives this community bodily shape. The interpretation of the prophecy clearly spells out the transformative and resurrectional impact of God’s Word.

I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. …Then he said to me, ‘Prophecy to the breath, propheya, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.’ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. Then he said to me, ‘Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD.’ (NRSV, Ez 37:4-14)

This lengthy passage from Ez 37 reveals the dynamic drama in the power of God’s Word spoken through the prophet. Notice the many times ‘breathe’ or ‘breath’ appear. The last line sums up the biblical theology of the Word: ‘I, the LORD, have spoken and will act’ (Ez 37:14). God’s word spoken through the prophet is dynamic and life-giving for the Israelites. Its effect echoes the creative act of God’s breath in Genesis when God breathes into the earthling’s nostrils and makes the earthling a living being (Gen 2:7).

- The power of God’s Word comes to its fullest expression in the ministry of Jesus, whom the Gospel of John calls, God’s Word ‘enfleshed’ (Jn 1:14)... The gospel writers show how his ministry is one of word-deed. Jesus acts, especially in his healing actions and
meal ministry, and speaks through his teaching. His words and deeds are two sides to his one ministry revealing God’s *dabar* that creates, frees, forgives, heals and raises from death.

This biblical background to *ruach* and *dabar* is the foundation for our appreciation of the ‘Word of God’ which we celebrate and proclaim in our liturgies. The Word of God addresses the baptized community of Jesus’ sisters and brothers. The Word effects; it has the power to impact, change, enliven and consolidate.

*The ‘Word’ in Catholic Teaching*

The appreciation of the effectiveness and dynamism of God’s Word finds an echo in Catholic teaching and practice through the ages. Caesarius of Arles (469-541) writes about the respect which Christians show to the Word of God. ‘The Word of God is in no way less than the Body of Christ; nor should it be received less worthily,’ says Caesarius in one of his sermons. He then poses an important question still relevant today.

I ask you, brothers or sisters, tell me: which to you seems the greater, the word of God, or the Body of Christ? If you wish to say what is true you will have to answer that the word of God is not less than the Body of Christ. Therefore just as when the Body of Christ is administered to us, what care do we not use so that nothing of it falls from our hands on the ground, so should we with equal care see that the Word of God which is being imparted to us shall not be lost to our soul, while we speak or think of something else. For the one who listens carelessly to the Word of God is not less guilty than the one who through their own inattention suffers the Body of Christ to fall to the ground.¹

There are many things about Caesarius’ instruction that make it remarkable for its time, not the least is the fact that the reception of communion in the hand was the practice of the day. Caesarius places the reception of the Word on the same level of importance and respect as the reception of the Body of Jesus in the Eucharist.

This recognition of the equal reverence for the Word and Eucharist finds an echo in the 1962 teaching of Vatican II from *Dei Verbum* (‘On Divine Revelation’):

The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as the Church venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, the Church unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God’s word and of Christ’s body... like the Christian religion itself, all the preaching of the Church must be nourished and regulated by Sacred Scripture.²

This is one of the most remarkable statements of Vatican II. The Council bishops consider the ‘veneration’ of the Scriptures on the same level of theological importance as veneration of the eucharistic body of Jesus. They understand this truth reflected in historical practice (‘The Church has *always* venerated...’). Rather than an historical accident, the veneration of the Word has ‘always’ been the part of the Church’s liturgical life. Both Word and Eucharist are sources of spiritual nourishment. In the celebration of the Eucharist, the baptised are fed from the table of the Word and the table of the Eucharist. The Scriptures, like the Eucharist, are essential for regulating and nurturing Christian living.

There are two other more recent examples of the importance of the Scriptures to the life of the Catholic community. These are found in the teaching of Benedict XVI and the October 2008 Synod of Bishops.

Benedict’s teaching and encyclicals are laced with insights that reflect his appreciation of the Bible. Perhaps one of the clearest expressions of this is seen in his general audience address of November 7, 2007. It is a catechetical address on the life of St Jerome given to 40000 pilgrims gathered in St Peter’s Square. In his address, Benedict:

- recognised how contemplation and solitude with the Word of God matured Jerome’s deep religious sense, what Benedict called his ‘Christian sensibility.’ Jerome’s attitude to the Word needed to be reclaimed today;
In *Proposition 48* the bishops recognize the symbiotic relationship that occurs between the Word as it is spoken into a particular culture. The Word 'makes fecund' what are recognised as the spiritual realities of people's culture and tradition. In the dynamic people are confirmed and perfected through the Word addressed to them. For this relationship between Word and culture to be authentic, the bishops encourage that the proclaimers of the Word ('missionaries') must be steeped in the social-cultural environment in which they live. In other words, *Proposition 48* affirms that God's Word cannot be unilaterally imposed on people, but must sensitively address the world in which they live.

From these selected propositions alone it is clear that the Synod recognized that the Bible must more fully permeate the social and cultural context of Catholics. Liturgy, good preaching and the Word's explicit social engagement were essential for this. They are also at the heart of a spirituality of the Word in the parish.

**The 'Word of the Lord'**

At the conclusion of each of the Scripture readings in the Liturgy of the Word, the lector says, 'The Word of the Lord.' The congregation responds, 'Thanks be to God.' But for what are we giving thanks? What is the meaning of the affirmation that a particular reading from the Bible is the 'Word of the Lord'?

Fundamentalism and literalism are attitudes towards the proclamation of the Liturgy of the Word not uncommon in our parish communities. These attitudes emerge when the hearer believes that the physical reading of the biblical text or the book out of which the readings are proclaimed (the lectionary) is literally God's Word. That is, God's Word is totally identified with the lectionary and its reading, and *vice versa*. In this understanding, the 'Word of the Lord' can be interpreted as meaning that what we have just listened to is actually God's Word, spoken (usually) in English with a particular accent unique to the reader and heard and interpreted literally by the listener.

There are several problems with this position. It comes from an implicit belief in verbal inspiration, that God told the writer of the biblical text (in English of course) what to write. And what was written must have been obvious to the reading audience, after all, why would God make things so difficult to understand? Therefore the plain or simple meaning of the biblical text, one which requires no study or interpretation, must be God's intended meaning. This understanding makes no allowance for the historical, cultural or social conditioning of the text, that the biblical authors were people of their own day and culture who held beliefs and attitudes unique to their world embodied in their writings, and not necessarily the same as ours.

There is another and more fruitful way to approach the meaning of the 'Word of the Lord.' This is through an exploration of metaphor. The expression 'Word,' like all expressions applied to God ('rock,' 'shepherd,' 'warrior,' 'eagle,' 'father,' 'mother') is a metaphor. It is our way of trying to understand something beyond our ordinary experience while acknowledging that our human experience is all we have to work with. A metaphor is our way of saying that what we are trying to describe both 'is' and 'is not' the expression. God is like a 'rock' (firm, faithful, solid, reliable, dependable); but God is also *not* like a rock (cold, hard, brown...). The totality of God's essence is not summed up in the metaphor 'rock.'

In the same way, 'Word' tells us something about God, but does not express God's totality. 'Word' is about communication. The expression 'Word of the Lord' is using the metaphor 'word' to describe God's self-communication and revelation.

From my own experience I know that friends gain an insight into who I am through the words I use. My words are an expression and extension of myself. They reveal me. But
I also know that my words are not my total revelation; they do not reveal who I am fully. There is more to me than readers will conjecture from the words that compose this present essay, for example. From this point of view, my words are mysterious, at the same time they both reveal and conceal; they invite intimacy and friendship.

The expression, 'Word of the Lord,' is about God's self-revelation and communication with human beings. It is mysterious and never exhaustive. God's Word invites us into intimacy and friendship. Vatican II reminded us that God's revelation occurs in several ways, through the lives of faithful followers of Jesus throughout history (summed up in the term 'tradition'), within creation, cultures, peoples, other faith traditions, and in a unique way in the Bible. The ultimate expression of God's self-revelation is Jesus. He is God's Word, expressing God's nature and desire for humanity and creation.

The Bible is a particular witness to the experience of God's Word, of God's self-communication as experienced by the Israelites and Jesus of Nazareth, especially through his ministry, death and resurrection. The biblical writings witness to the imperfect, historically and culturally conditioned experience of God's self-revelation to human beings. These writings do not reveal the totality of God's revelation. The Bible is a witness to people's limited experience of God. As the Catholic biblical scholar Sandra Schneiders summarises it, the expression 'Word of God' is a metaphor for the totality of divine revelation, especially as it is expressed in Jesus. The Bible is a witness to the human experience of divine revelation. In other words, it is a limited, biased, human testimony to a limited experience of God's self-gift. The Bible is not divine revelation nor does it contain divine revelation. It contains the necessarily inadequate, sometimes even erroneous, verbal expression of the experience of divine revelation of those who are privileged subjects of that gift of God...The Bible is literally the word of human beings about their experience of God.3

Within the parish setting, every time we proclaim the Scriptures in the Liturgy of the Word, we are hearing about the experience of God's revelation encountered by human beings throughout history. In the First Reading from the Old Testament and in the Psalms we listen to the Israelites' experience of their communion with God. The reading becomes their word to us of their encounter with the God of the covenant who accompanied them throughout their history and spoke to them.

The Second Reading, usually drawn from Paul's letters, comes from a first century Graeco-Roman Jewish follower of Jesus writing to Jesus householders about how to live authentically in relationship to God revealed in Jesus. The reading is Paul's word to these Jesus followers, and through them to us today, about God's Word, Jesus. The Gospel reading, likewise, is the word of the evangelist to a particular household of disciples of the late first century, focused on God's ultimate Word, Jesus, in his healing and preaching ministry summed up in his passion, death and resurrection. The Gospels explicitly concern Jesus, God's Word enacted in the ministry of Jesus. In all the readings, we encounter God's Word enfolded in the lives of faith-filled people, the Israelites and Jesus householders, who reveal to us how this Word is encountered. The one who most transparently incarnates God's Word is Jesus. From this perspective, when we say 'Thanks be to God' to the proclamation that concludes the reading ('The Word of the Lord') we are thanking God for the way the Word, God's self-revelation, is tangibly experienced in history and cultures by particular believing communities, and how this experience can be shared with us.

4. A Spirituality of the Word

How we move from the biblical text with its unique culturally and historically limited experience of God's Word to ourselves and our world is the focus of the final part of this essay. This will lead to some practical suggestions inspired by the Synod's Proposition 14
for reclaiming the importance of the Word of God in the parish context.

The growth in a life of faith centered on the Word of the Lord requires regular prayer centered on the Scriptures. Through conversation between my life and the world of these privileged believers in God as found in the Bible, and especially with Jesus as revealed in the gospels, God's Word 'speaks' and inspires. The encounter of the Israelites and the writers of the New Testament with God's Word as revealed to them, and especially in the New Testament with God's self-communication in the story, ministry, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, becomes a window and a mirror for my encounter with God now.

The following is a way that I have found helpful in enabling this conversation to deepen. It is centered on exploring the word 'aware' and inspired by the prayer form, the 'awareness examen,' from St Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), founder of the Jesuits. The prayer can take place over a few or several minutes, privately or with others, and follows a similar format suggested by each letter of 'aware.' I call it the 'aware prayer.'

1. **Attend:** I attend to the presence of God with me now, over the past day, and throughout my life.

2. **Welcome:** I welcome what is going on in my life, world, parish, church, family. My mind begins to settle on one particular person or event of the past twenty-four hours. I recall everything about this encounter, with an awareness of God's presence in that encounter.

3. **Alert:** I alert myself to the biblical text I am about to engage, something of its background, history. Perhaps here I recall what scholars have written about this text. Here I acknowledge the time and culturally-conditioned background to the passage, and also that this text reflects people's experience of God's Word to them. The reflections on the Sunday readings offered towards the end of each edition of *Compass* may be of help here.

4. **Read and Reflect:** I prayerfully read over and reflect upon the passage before me. I find it helpful to do this three times: once for the head, (as I try and understand the meaning of the words of the passage); once for the heart (as I allow the passage to speak into my soul); a final time as I allow the passage to 'wash' over me and make room of God's Word to speak to me.

5. **Express:** I express to God what I hear the Word saying to me, my world and faith community. I conclude expressing a brief word of thanks to God for what I have experienced and how this passage of scripture has spoken to me.

This approach is simply a way of engaging the biblical text that respects the world and writers of the passage while allowing it to touch my world and life. It is not intended to be followed slavishly, but provides a framework for prayerfully encountering the Bible to help build the spirit within. I have used this 'aware' approach frequently in parish settings (even in homilies). It could be the basis for small groups of parishioners coming together regularly to pray over the forthcoming Sunday readings. The regularity of such gatherings fosters community and energy and the last part of the prayer ('Express') could be the basis for a parish's formulation for the Prayers of Intercession.

This final point, how the parish's Prayers of Intercession can be drawn from the prayer life of small groups of parishioners regularly praying over the Sunday readings, leads finally to a few concluding suggestions for enhancing the place of the Word within the parish's liturgical life:

- Allow significant time of silence after each of the readings. Fifteen to thirty seconds offers a way of 'slowing down' the readings so that they become proclamations, and gives people time to capture prayerfully the experience of God's encounter by those who first inspired or wrote the readings.
- Process the lectionary through the church for every liturgical celebration. During the singing of the Alleluia (and it must be sung, never said, otherwise it is excluded) include a
procession of the Book of the Gospels when possible or practical.

- Celebrate parish liturgies whose exclusive focus is on the proclamation of the Word. This means educating parishioners about the Liturgy of the Word and its nurturing importance. This could lead a parish to celebrate the Liturgy of the Word without the distribution of Holy Communion.

- Ensure that readers are carefully selected, regularly formed and encouraged to prepare their particular reading for proclamation by studying and praying over it.

- Encourage every parishioner to purchase a Bible. Offer educational opportunities for parishioners to learn about the Bible and what’s in it.

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Let me conclude with a lengthy but beautiful quotation from the recent bishops’ Synod. The quotation captures the bishops’ conviction that a biblical spirituality must totally permeate our world. It also promotes study of the Bible, values the importance of silence in engaging it, and encourages a way of attention to the Bible that permeates daily life. In other words, this quotation expresses and summarises the present essay and its focus on fostering a spirituality of the Word in our parishes.

The Word of God must run through the world’s streets which today are also those of computer, television and virtual communication. The Bible must enter into families so that parents and children read it, pray with it and that it may be their lamp for the steps on the way to existence (cf. Ps 119:105). The Holy Scriptures must also enter into the schools and in the cultural areas because for centuries they were the main reference for art, literature, music, thinking and the same common moral. Their symbolic, poetic and narrative richness makes them a banner of beauty for faith as well as for culture, in a world often scarred by ugliness and lowliness. . . . Dear brothers and sisters, guard the Bible in your houses, fully read, study and understand its pages, transform them into prayer and witness of life, listen to it with love and faith in the liturgy. Create the silence to effectively hear the Word of the Lord and hold a silence after the listening, because it will continue to dwell, live and speak to you. Make it resound at the beginning of your day so that God will have the first word and let it echo in you in the evenings so that the last word will be God’s. 4

REFERENCES

1 Caesarius of Arles, Sermo 300.
2 Dei Verbum (“On Divine Revelation”), par. 21.
4 XII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, ‘Message for the People of God by the Synod of Bishops’ (5-26 October, 2008).

The presentation of the Gospels should be done in such a way as to elicit an encounter with Christ, who provides the key to the whole biblical revelation and communicates the call of God that summons each one to respond. The word of the prophets and that of the ‘ministers of the Word’ (Luke 1.2) ought to appear as something addressed to Christians now.

Pontifical Biblical Commission, The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, Ch. 4.