

Today we will be commissioning new readers and new extraordinary ministers of holy communion. This will be an important moment for each of them personally, but also an important moment for this community. The commissioning reminds us that we are a community that listens to the Word of God and that we are also a community that is fed and nourished by the Eucharist. In a very real way, the Word and the Eucharist are at the life of every Christian community.

Today also happens to be Word of God Sunday in Australia. It was celebrated two weeks ago in most of the rest of the world but was changed here so that we could wait until life returned to normal after the summer activities. Word of God Sunday was established by Pope Francis in 2019 to remind us of the centrality of the Bible in the Christian life.

The phrase, “Word of God”, refers to God’s communication into the world. The prophet Isaiah spoke God’s word to the people of his time: “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it”. God’s final word to the world is Jesus, his Son, the Word made flesh. In him, the Word of God becomes human, with all the joys and hopes, the grief and anxiety that are part of every human life. Marvellously, this same word is forever accessible to us in the Bible. So, through the Bible we encounter Jesus who is active in our lives. Reading the Bible, then, is never a purely intellectual exercise it is also a form of prayer. We allow ourselves to be shaped by that word.

Our readings today help us to understand what this is all about. Jesus goes to the house of Simon and Andrew and cures Simon’s mother-in-law who is ill. To appreciate what is going on, we need to recall last Sunday’s gospel, which was the passage just before what we heard today. Jesus was in the synagogue teaching, and the people were hearing the word of God. This word made a deep impression on them because he spoke with authority. His word was powerful and it transformed lives. Now, in Simon’s house we see once again the power of the word of God as Simon’s mother-in-law is healed through the encounter with Jesus. It

seems that this is the first time she encountered Jesus, and that encounter brought her healing. She begins a journey of coming to know who he is.

St Jerome, who translated the Bible into Latin, famously said that ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ. So, as we read the Bible, we come to know him better. Knowing him better is not simply a matter of knowing facts about him, rather it is about drawing close to him and being transformed by him. There is a sense in which we can never fully know him; there is always more to know and more to experience. That is why we keep reading the Bible. It is why Pope Francis recently encouraged Catholics to read a few verses of the Bible each day. It will be like the rain that waters and gives growth.

Simon's mother-in-law is one of the first in the gospel of Mark to be healed by Jesus. She is one of the first to hear the word of God and to experience the effects of that word. An important piece of information in this gospel account is that once she was healed, she began to wait on those who were there in the house. In other words, she served them food. Her serving of food is a response to being touched by the word of God. Meals were always important in Jesus' ministry. This woman has a special role at the meal where Jesus is at table.

I think this woman can be a good model for those who will be commissioned as readers and extraordinary ministers of holy communion. Her service, her ministry, springs from her hearing the word of God and being transformed by it. Both our readers and our ministers of holy communion will come to their ministry as people who listen to the word of God. Our readers will then proclaim that word in our liturgical assembly so that others may hear and receive the word. Our ministers of holy communion will assist with the distribution of holy communion at Mass, but also take it to the sick. They too do this in response to God's call and their encounter with the word of God.

This woman is also a model for all of us. She reminds us first, that when we hear the word of God, we hear a call to allow ourselves to be transformed. She reminds us, second, that hearing the word of God will lead to serving others. In this way we are bearers of the word of God in our world. When there are so many words in today's world grabbing for our attention, let us give time to the Word of God.