

Sermon for Proper 23, Year B

The Text: Hebrews 4:12-16

What are some of the images of Jesus that come to mind for you? Is it gentle Jesus, the Good Shepherd, carrying a little lamb? Or powerful Jesus, rebuking the ferocious storm that threatened the lives of his terrified disciples on the Sea of Galilee? Is it compassionate Jesus, who, against all social convention, welcomed those who were outcasts and freed them from their debilitating sufferings and oppressions? Is it Jesus, the meek Lamb of God, who humbled himself to the point of death, on a cross? Is it Jesus the miracle-worker, or Jesus the teacher? Is it Jesus as the basic necessity of life, pictured as living water or the bread of life, or light of the world?

I wonder if today's text presents another image of Jesus—one which is not common or even one which we've never pictured before.

Jesus as a surgeon!

Today's text begins with a statement about the word of God; the Bible. Some see the Bible as out-of-date, out-of-touch, totally irrelevant for life in today's society. Some see the Bible as not carrying any authority at all because it is merely a collection of human stories shaped by the community of faith over the centuries as they've handed it on from one generation to the next and that, instead, God only speaks to each of us through the Holy Spirit in an experience quite separately from the Scriptures.

But God's word is not irrelevant and out of touch, bound to the culture of its day, because it is not dead but it is a *living* word. It is an *active* word. It is a powerful and *effective* word at work in the hearts of those it speaks to. The writer to the Hebrews says: "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

But this Word of God is not just the Scriptures either. Remember that John describes Jesus as the Word of God—the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us. In today's text the writer to the Hebrews speaks this way too. The Word of God is spoken of as an '*it*'; that is, the Scriptures—but then the Word of God is referred to as '*him*':

“...the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before *him* no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of *him* before whom we must give account” (v12-13).

Jesus is the Living Word of God from all eternity. He is the one who the writer to the Hebrews speaks of when he says: “The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account” (4:12-13).

There is a mysterious relationship between the Word of God written and the Word of God incarnate. When the one is opened the other is present. Martin Luther once said: “Holy Scripture is the garment which our Lord Christ has put on and in which he lets himself be seen and found.”

So whenever we read the Scriptures we meet with the author of them. Whenever we hear the Scriptures Jesus comes to us and *he goes to work on our hearts*. That's why I wonder if our reading allows us to see the image—one perhaps which we've never thought of before—of Jesus the surgeon? Jesus, dressed not in rabbinical robes but a green gown, with surgical mask on, with the bright operating theatre light behind him, about to perform open-heart surgery upon us, with the Scriptures as his scalpel.

Now that's not a very nice image—in fact it can be an anxiety-heightening one as we think about our vulnerability, being exposed; “laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must give an account”. We don't want what's deep down there in our secret heart to be brought out into the open. Sometimes we don't even know what's there and we wish that God didn't, either—the things that we keep hidden away from others; what we secretly crave, all the ways we strive to earn the approval of others rather than resting in our Heavenly Father's approval of us for Christ's sake, our coping strategies to protect ourselves, like pushing others away so they won't get too close to us because we're afraid of being hurt.

God doesn't use his word to *discover* what's in our secret heart. He already knows what's there—all the yucky stuff from our past; our sins, our shame. But he uses his word to lead us to become aware of it and to confess it, so that it can be removed from us—our hurtful words before they even become words and are still thoughts and attitudes, the secret judgemental thoughts about others, the refusal to forgive, the insistence we always be right, the things we enjoy to dull the pain or make ourselves feel worthwhile and important, the occasions we fail to share our time

and the abundance of what we have with others who are wanting, the times we turn from God instead of turning towards him.

That sounds painful doesn't it...and it is! It hurts our pride to confess that we have sinned. We join with King David who wrote in Psalm 32: My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear—and we look for a place to hide...just like Adam and Eve who made coverings for themselves and hid after they fell to the Devil's temptation to doubt God at his word and be their own authority.

But God didn't hide from sin. He loves the whole world—which means that he loves you too! He loves the world and you so much that he established the way for humanity to be restored to fullness of life with him, forever. In the Old Testament, a high priest was appointed who God authorised to draw near to him on behalf of the people to seek his mercy. The high priest would offer a sacrifice for the forgiveness of Israel's sins each year on the Great Day of Atonement. He would do this in what was known as the Most Holy Place in the Tabernacle, the tent in the desert around which God's people camped. The Holy Place was separated from other areas of the Tabernacle by a huge curtain that was as thick as a human hand. God only allowed one person, the High Priest, behind that curtain where he was present, and only on one day of the year, to make payment for the people's sins.

Then God himself confronted sin, once for all, when he came into our world, clothed in human flesh in the person of Christ. What other god is so concerned to know us personally, that he became one of us? That's exactly what the true God did when Jesus was born.

Jesus didn't just become human only to sympathise with how we feel...he became fully human to actually help us personally in our deepest needs. Our reading says: "For we don't have a High Priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin". This Jesus who became human to sympathise with our weaknesses is the sinless Son of God, who took our frail and sinful humanity upon himself. It died there, with him, that day he died on the Cross. In baptism he buried our sinful self with him in his death – and raised our new self to life with him in his resurrection, so that through faith in him we receive his very own righteousness as if we had lived perfectly ourselves!

And after Jesus' death on Good Friday, the curtain of the temple about as thick as a human hand, which separated the Most Holy Place, was torn in two—an impossibility for humans to do. But with God, all things are possible, as Jesus says to us in today's Gospel reading. The way to God's presence is now open to all,

through Jesus because he is now the Most Holy Place, where the fullness of God's presence dwells.

And so there is a great promise in our text: though sinful and undeserving, though unable to help ourselves enter the Kingdom of Heaven, we can now "approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need".

The image of Jesus as surgeon, removing from us that which is not good for us; not good for our relationship with God and others is perhaps a painful one, yet Jesus himself knows what pain is like, because he laid down his very life in sacrificial love for the life of the world. We have someone who understands what our journey through life is like; someone who knows everything about us—our joys, our sufferings, our limitations and pain, our fears and challenges, our needs, our emotions.

He invites us to come to him so that he can take from us all that eats away at us inside. We have the promise from God's own word that when we approach his throne we will receive mercy and grace to help us in our time of need. Again, at this Service, our High Priest has come to give us the love and mercy we need, but do not deserve. This mercy of God gives us the power to be what he declares we have become in Holy Baptism—God's own children.

"How hard it is for people to enter the Kingdom of God," Jesus says in today's Gospel reading. It is so hard it would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. Actually, it is not just hard for mere mortals, but impossible.

But nothing is impossible for God. He has sent us our great high priest to do what we are not able to do by our own strength. So let us draw near to him, confident that we will receive from him mercy and grace to help us in our time of need.

Now may the peace from our great High Priest, Jesus Christ, which passes all human understanding, guard and keep our hearts in Him, strengthen us in faith, and comfort us always. Amen.