

Homily for November 23, 2018

In the reading from Revelation there is reference to a scroll that John is invited to take as Angel says:

Take it, and eat; it will be as sweet as honey in your mouth... So I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth”.

The sweetness of the scroll is a recurring thought in Scripture. In Psalm 19 we read that to the psalmist, the judgments of God are sweeter than honey and the honeycomb (Psalm 19:10). In today’s psalm it was stated this way: ‘How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!’ (Psalm 119:103)

It may well be that behind these words lies a Jewish educational custom. When a Jewish child was learning the alphabet, it was written on a slate in a mixture of flour and honey. The child was told what the letters were and how they sounded. After the original instruction, the teacher would point at a letter and would ask: ‘What is that, and how does it sound?’ If the child was able to answer correctly, the letter could be licked off the slate as a reward!¹

Today’s readings are telling us something about the Word of God, represented by the scroll and the law. It is offered to each person, is to be digested like honey and will be both a sweet and bitter experience.

Twice St. John is told to take the scroll. The scroll is not handed to him; even when he asks the angel to give it to him, the answer is that he must take it. The meaning is that God’s revelation is never forced on anyone; we must take it freely.

Once we do take it we discover that there is a sweetness to the word. Here’s something to notice about God’s word. The psalmist has a lot of different words for the Law: decrees, promises, precepts, word. It’s not just a matter of commandments that we have to follow. It’s a way of life that brings fulfillment and peace.

This makes sense if we consider the books known as “the Law” in the Jewish Scriptures. These first five books of the Bible include not just rules, but also history, drama, spiritual lessons, and a host of colorful characters. Taken together, these books tell the story of God’s redemptive work among his chosen people. This story, this sweep of salvation history, is what the psalmist is so enthusiastic about!

Even if we narrow our view to the Ten Commandments, we find cause for rejoicing. Pick any commandment. What would be the long-term results of disregarding it? Pain, brokenness, separation from others and from God. Contrast this with the benefits of following that

¹ Barclay, W. (2004). [*Revelation of John*](#) (Vol. 2, pp. 64–65). Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press.

commandment. A healthy relationship with God, a stable family life, relationships of trust with friends and neighbors, a balanced life. God's decrees really are sweeter than honey!²

One of the great privileges of my priesthood is when people share with me how the word of God is coming alive in their lives. The truth of Scripture changes the way they see themselves and the world around them.

But there is also the other dimension to God's word. We read in Revelation: "it will be bitter to your stomach... when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter." Now think about Jesus. He is the Word of God, Honey Himself. However when he went into the Temple he saw terrible practices occurring where the Word of God was violated and people abused. This left a bitterness in his stomach resulting in the overturning of the money changers.

Although less intense for us because we are not the Word Made Flesh we too can experience a bitter taste and spiritual indigestion when we realize in our own life ways we have disregarded the Word of God. We can also experience this upset when in the lives of those closest to us, especially adult children who have turned away from the Church and the Lord, we taste the bitterness of their indifference, agnosticism and even atheism. Then there is the bitterness resulting from abuses in the Church that parallels Jesus' experience in the Jerusalem Temple.

But let's never allow the bitterness to distract us from knowing that God's Word is always good and daily we are invited to take His word, learn it, digest it and live by it so with the Psalmist we can sing:

Your decrees are my heritage forever. They are the joy of my heart. With open mouth I pant because I long for your commandments.

² <https://wau.org/meditations/>