

Retreat at MaryLake  
Friday Evening, September 28, 2012  
*Fr. Dominic Borg, ocd, Opening Homily*

Starting from yesterday, the Liturgy of the Word presents in front of us a famous Didactic book, the Book of Ecclesiastes. Some people mix it up with the Book of Ecclesiasticus. So we have these two books. Both of them are Wisdom literature, both of them are Didactic, both of them can teach us many practical things.

The Book of Ecclesiasticus is also called the Book of Sirach. The Book of Ecclesiastes is also called Qoheleth. Qoheleth means a source ... a source of wisdom ... a source of teaching. The Book of Ecclesiastes starts with a question that in English we unfortunately translate into a statement. That is because they do not understand the role that the "HI" has to play in the Jewish drama, because it's not only just an article. The HI can also introduce a question, an interrogative question. And so the first sentence is not just "*vanity of vanities, everything is vanity*". Many translators see in that statement a different meaning, a different message. It can be translated "*vanity of vanities, is everything vanity?*" It comes with a question mark. The Jewish translation of the words Habel Habelim, also has the root "vanity" it is also the root for the word in Hebrew for breath. Man is just a breath ... just passes by and leaves no trace behind him.

Why do they insist that it should be a question rather than a statement? Because the author begins to mention one vanity after another, one toy after another, a toy that does not render anything. But then he says "*but the fear of God is not vanity*". Is everything vanity? This is vanity, but the fear of God is not vanity. The fear of God is the beginning of Wisdom. And so, though it

seems negative, the message of Ecclesiastes has healing in it. It is like Buckleys "it is bitter, but it works", it is effective. And the same it is with the Book of Ecclesiastes. It seems to be a little negative. When you and I open our ears to what the author is telling us, we discover that he is placing a treasure in our hearts. He wants to install this word of wisdom, this word of kindness in your life and in my life.

Take today for example. Today we heard this beautiful sentence that says "*For everything there is a season*" ... that is how it started. There is a season to run away, there is a season to stay put. There is a season when we can be engaged in material things and then there is a season when we are called to be engaged in spiritual things. There is a season where you and I leave the material things, we leave our concerns behind us, and we allow the Word of God to take us aside privately the way Jesus Christ privately took the man who was deaf and dumb. He withdrew him and took him aside privately.

This is what the Lord is doing to you and to me today. He is pulling us privately from our daily routine. He has placed in front of us this event. It's not a burning bush. Moses said "*let me turn aside and make time to watch this bush*." The bush was being burned without being consumed. He **made** time. He turned aside. There is a time where Moses, when he was tending the sheep, left the sheep there and he turned aside in order to be able to examine, to go into detail, to scrutinize the Word of God. The word "davar" is not only a word spoken. It is also an event.

In Revelations, strictly speaking, it is not God who speaks, but it is God who **acts**, and we who react. And when we enter into this interaction, then we begin to unfold the

event and we begin to hear the event speaking to you and to me.

We will be able to hear the Word of God and that Word gives us insight, because the Word is light. *“This Word was the light of every human being coming into the world.”* And so when you and I open our ears to the Word of God, we have insight into the events of our life. We will be able to appreciate and to see as the saying goes that “every person is interesting, if only we make time to listen”. The Lord has brought us a time. There is a time where you and I withdraw from society. This time is in this place of quiet, this place where some of our commodities are put aside, and we are more in touch with the history of salvation. We are in touch with Jesus Christ, with this Word that is calling us privately the way Martha went to Mary and she told her privately *“The Teacher is here, and He wants to talk to you.”* To each one of us individually Martha is telling us today *“The Teacher is here, and He wants to talk to you.”*

As we stand at the threshold of this Year of Faith, we have copies of this document, and I hope that by now you all have a copy of it. The Motu Proprio Porta Fide – The Door of Faith. Its title is taken from chapter 14 of the Acts of the Apostles, where *“The Lord has opened for us a door of faith.”* Allow me to read a little from it. You will be surprised how many times “door”, “open door” and “closed door” is used in the Bible.

Allow me to read a couple of sentences for you. As we said, Acts of the Apostles, chapter 14, verse 27 says *“And when they arrived, they gathered the church together and declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles.”* The Book of Revelations says: *“I looked, and there was an open door*

*in heaven.* An open door is a revelation. A closed door is secrecy. But there was an **open door**. God is revealing His love for humanity.

Another beautiful text, Colossians, chapter 4, verse 3 *“At the same time pray for us as well, that God will open to us a door for the word that we may declare the mystery of Christ for which I am in prison, so that I may reveal it clearly, as I should.”* Paul is speaking to the Christians so that they will pray for him because the Lord has opened this door of the Word so that he will preach it, he will make it manifest clearly as he should.

Another beautiful text in the Book of Revelations, chapter 3, a word is given to the Church of Philadelphia and to the Church of Sardis. In chapter 3, verse 8 we read *“Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and you have kept my word and have not denied my name. I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but are lying – I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you.”*

I have sent in front of you an open door, a door that no-one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, surrounded with these enemies, the enemy of the world. But the world itself will come and bow down before you. He is saying these words to the Church of Philadelphia. In the same chapter 3 of the Book of Revelations, in verse 20 he says: *“Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. Let anyone who has*

*an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”*

Listen to the importance of this expression “*Let anyone who has an ear listen to this Word.*” How many times do you notice that when Jesus Christ is going to say a parable, He will introduce the parable by saying “*What do you think?*” “*What do you say?*” “A man had two children, and they youngest said to the Father ... “*What do you think?*” He is telling a story so that you and I will interrupt. It is not a story that He has said only once. He repeats the same parable many times. He will preach in one place, and then He will go to preach in another, and if something is very important he will not relate it only to a small group. He will repeat to another group in another place ... and people used to interrupt on what they are hearing. “*Those who have ears, let them listen.*”

I invite you to listen to a few words that the Pope said recently in his reflection which was more of a homily on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time when the Gospel was taken from Mark, chapter 7, verses 31-37. The Pope recalled how “*Jesus was brought in the Region known as Decapolis, between the coastal area of Tyre and Sidon and the Sea of Galilee. When He was presented with a deaf man to heal, Jesus touched his ear and tongue and looking up to heaven pronounced the words “Eph’pha tha”. Immediately the man was made well, able to hear and speak This deaf man’s ear, thanks to Jesus’ intervention was opened.*” The Holy Father explained. “Before he had been closed, isolated. It was very difficult for him to communicate. His healing brought an opening to others and the world, an opening that, starting from the organs of hearing and speech involved his entire person and life. Finally he was able to communicate and thus to relate to others in a

new way.” “Yes”, the Pope added, “we all know that man’s closure and isolation do not depend solely on the organs of sense. There is an inner closure which concerns the deepest call of the person ... what the Bible calls the heart. This is what Jesus came to open, to liberate, so as to enable us to live our relationship with God and with others to the full. He wants you and me to open our hearts. He wants that this *ephphatha* does not only touch our ears, or our eyes, or our tongues.” The prophet Hosea says “*I will take back my people to the wilderness and speak tenderly to their hearts*”. It is in our heart that God wants to install His word. It is in our hearts that this word *ephphatha* has to penetrate.

Notice this. For me it was a revelation what the Pope has said here. He says: “That is why I said that this little word “*ephphatha*” be opened, sums up Christ’s entire mission. This word sums up Christ’s entire mission. It is a very profound sentence, because mind and heart are like parachutes, they function only if they are open. If we open our hearts to receive the Word, if we open our ears to hear the Word, to listen, to obey it, then we are able to function, then we are able to catch the wind, the power of the Holy Spirit. The sperm of the Spirit is called the Word of God, and that sperm will give us power, it will generate life in each one of us.

Here the Holy Father said: “That is why I said that this little word *ephphatha*, be opened, sums up Christ’s entire mission.”

It is a very beautiful explanation “*For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to lay down His life as a ransom for many.*” Jesus entered Jericho to seek out and to save the lost. He became man so that man, made inwardly deaf and dumb by sense, would be able to hear the voice of God, the voice of love speaking to his heart,

so he will learn to speak in the language of love, to communicate with God and with others. This is why the Holy Father says that this word *ephphatha* sums up the entire mission of Jesus Christ, because Jesus Christ came to install in us this language of love.

This is the reason why the Bible is not written in Hebrew, nor is it written in Greek. The Bible is written in the language of love, and the language of love can be understood by all. This is why Vatican II in *Verbum Domini* says that “The Bible is the letter of love sent by God the Father to His children who are in exile.” You and I, with the prodigal son, have to return to make this journey out of exile. We have to return from our exile. We have to return to our Father Who loves us, to the Father Who is full of compassion. God-willing we will see tomorrow.

There is a time for everything. A time to leave behind our problems, our concerns for material things, our concern for our family, our work, and be disposed to hear the Word of Jesus Christ *ephphatha*, be opened. St. Paul says “*faith comes by hearing, and hearing the Word of God*”.

We are at the threshold of this Year of Faith, and we are going to hear a lot about the importance and the power in the Word of God. In Ezra, chapter 7, verse 10, we read that Ezra spent his time in studying the Scriptures, in praying with them, in putting them into practice, and in teaching them to others.

You and I, in this year of Faith that is ahead of us, have many resources. Tomorrow, God-willing, we will begin by seeing the Notion of Faith in St. John of the Cross. You will be amazed at how often Pope John Paul II used in his teachings this notion, this

idea of faith, found in the doctrine of St. John of the Cross.

As we stand here, in the beginning of the journey ahead of us - which will be starting on the 11<sup>th</sup> of October and continues to the 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2013-, we will be facing Advent, we will be facing Lent. I hope that we prepare ourselves so that this Advent will speak with a clearer language to you and to me, so that this Lent that is coming upon us will speak also with clearer language to you and to me, the way Jesus Christ spoke clearly to this man who was deaf.

He is speaking to you and to me. Sometimes we think that we are outside of the Word ... no ... one thing brothers and sisters that I would like to install in you is this, that while we are listening to the Word of God, while we are in a Liturgical Celebration, Christ makes Himself present while we are hearing the Word. The disciples of Emmaus journeyed into the dark to go back to Jerusalem to narrate their experience. When they arrived, they discovered the other apostles. The Lord appeared to Peter, and also to us ... He appeared to us! While they were narrating, Jesus Christ made Himself present among them. We know it, don't we? We know it.

And, yet, they were terrified, they thought that He was a ghost. They thought that He was ghost, the Gospel says. And they could not believe what they were seeing, that Jesus Christ made Himself present among them. And Jesus Christ said to them “*Why do you marvel at this? Did I not tell you beforehand?*” Then He said to them “*Do you have something to eat?*”, and they presented Him with a small broiled fish, and He ate it in front of them.

Sometimes the statement that Jesus Christ is present among us, that when we are hearing

His Words in making Him present in front of us, it seems like a statement which is a ghost, an empty statement, something that cannot be captured, whereas in reality, a reality so true that He will help you and me - that **He is** a reality, a reality so concrete that St. John says in his letters *“What we have seen with our eyes, what we heard with our ears, what we have touched with our hands, this is what we announced to the Word of Life, so that you will have fellowship with us.”* You will have life with us - and so life is being poured into us through our ears. It is being installed in our hearts through this Word.

When we speak about the Year of Faith, the Door of Faith, the door has to be opened. There are times when we have to allow God to close the door too. Noah entered the ark and God closed the door behind him. It is not Noah who closed the door, it is God who closed the door behind Noah. We are told this in the Bible. Why? Because there is death, the flood, threatening his life, and Noah had no power over death. God intervened, the way He intervenes with you and with me in front of our sins. The sin has deafened us. We became deaf because of the sin. And so, the word *“ephphatha”* will clean our ears. *“You are clean because of the Words that I told you.”* And once our ears are cleaned, then we take the bearings, the directions from Jesus Christ.

Once we are clean, then we have insight and we can see God's presence in everything. There is a statement in the Talmud and also Rabbi Balshemttoff relates, that God knows how many times a leaf has to turn, and what distance it has to travel between the time it leaves the branch until it touches the ground. God knows. A beautiful statement, a powerful statement.

Last weekend I was in Dorion, outside of Thunder Bay at a Bible camp. Between one talk and another I went outside for a walk on the banks of Lake Superior, which was part of the camp property. In front of me there was something very small, and at first I thought it was a butterfly. I said to myself, ‘look at that very small butterfly, flying very fast’, and then I noticed that it was not a butterfly, it was a small piece of a leaf. It was fluttering very fast ... and then immediately I said “God knows how many times that leaf is turning, and how much it has to travel”, and I stood there in awe, watching this leaf.

Do you think that you would not stand in awe also when you are facing a miracle? But you are facing a tree ...and a tree is a miracle. It takes your carbon dioxide that can kill you, and it gives you back oxygen, life, something that you can breathe. That tree is a miracle.

Today we entered this property full of trees. How many of us thought that as soon as we stepped there that we are surrounded with these miracles?

Vanity of vanities. Breath is vanity. It is the same word as breath, and when we are taking this breath ... 65 years this machine has been working, no filter, no spare parts, so far at least, no oil change, and there it is, going 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. And yet it is something that we take for granted.

When we come in contact with reality, then we hear Jesus Christ saying to you and to me “I say to you listen ... what do you say?” As it says in the Gospel *“Who do you say that I am?”*

There was Herod, and there was Zacchaeus. Herod wanted to meet Jesus, so too Zacchaeus, but their attitudes are different.

Herod wanted to see “Who is Jesus.” He had heard about Him and wanted to meet Him to see who He is. Who is Jesus? He is curious. But Jesus did not talk to him and did not do any signs for him. Zacchaeus wanted to know who Jesus **IS**. What is the value? Is it worth investing in this Man? And what did Jesus Christ say to Zacchaeus? The same as He is saying to you and to me, we who are showing this kind of approach as Zacchaeus. “*Come down, today I must stay at your house.*” And don’t say “no, not today, first I have to go to confession, first I have to clear my house, because now it is upside down, I have been grumbling, cursing, rebelling”. No, you don’t say that to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ said “*Today I must stay at your house.*” **It is today!** Zacchaeus came down and received Him joyfully.

He discovered that it is worth investing in this Man. Half of his property straight away he is going to invest.

What did Jesus Christ say to Him? “*You are a son of Abraham*” you are a son of Faith ... you manifested faith in your actions. He is speaking to Zacchaeus, but He did not speak to Herod. Even though He did not speak to Herod, there is a very beautiful event taking place there. Jesus Christ, just by His presence, the Gospel says “*That day Herod and Pilate became friends, because as yet they were enemies.*” Jesus Christ entered there and He made them friends, without saying anything. The same will happen with you and with me, while we are hearing this Scripture being proclaimed, while we are attentive to His Word, the Word of Jesus Christ is operating, is working in us. It is breaking down the dividing walls of hostility and making one out of the two of us. The prayer of Jesus Christ “*That they may be one, even as you and me are one.*” is becoming reality, and

the more you hear that word *ephphatha*, the more the Word leaves this impact upon each one of us. “*You are clean because of the Word that I told you.*” You will be clean of all these distractions and be able to concentrate, to reflect upon God’s love for each one of us, and that love is manifested clearly in His Word, the Sacred Scriptures.

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