

GOD'S WORD IN THE WORLD

Twenty-fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time
September 18, 1977

Amos 8:4-7
1 Timothy 2:1-8
Luke 16:1-13

The object of the homily is primarily to be able to tell everyone who has gathered together to reflect on the Word of God, that the Word is fulfilled today in their midst. It is the realization of the Eternal Word of God. This Word is preached in the Eucharist and is not demagoguery as some have accused us. We are not obsessed with persecution but we do want to enlighten the reality of the Archdiocese with the light of this Eternal Word of God. In this way, all those persons who are members of this Church can judge the events that are occurring daily in our midst with criteria that are derived from this Eternal Word which prevails forever and not just use their own criteria.

Our opinions and judgments are fallible because they are human, but the Word of God is never deficient. Throughout their lives, Christians must learn to illuminate their paths and the events of their lives with this Eternal Word of God. How many events of the on-going history of our nation need to be illuminated with this Word of Eternal Wisdom!

Events of the week

How many commentaries have you heard about the assassination of the University Rector and his two companions!¹

One must look for God's judgment and not human judgment. How many human commentaries have you heard concerning the establishment of a new university in our country?² What are the criteria and the motivations for this? Human criteria do not necessarily make an action just and right unless this action is also viewed in light of God's Word.

We continue to be saddened by the kidnapping of Mrs. Chiurato. This occurred thirteen days ago and we have heard nothing since then. Her family, like the family of so many other people who have disappeared, is greatly distressed. As Christians, our hearts are touched by the suffering of another Christian. If this voice is being heard by those who are responsible for this act, then I beg you, in the name of Christ, to negotiate the freedom of this poor woman. At the same time that we pray for this family, we are joined in our prayers by those who are ill in the Providence Hospital and who offer special prayers for those who are suffering the pain of these injustices. From the depths of suffering and illness, the Church fulfills the word of Saint Paul: *Pray for the needs of humankind* (a).

Last Monday we prayed in the hospital chapel and celebrated Mass for another person who had disappeared³ and whose mother, not knowing whether her child was alive or dead,

was uncertain whether we could offer a Mass in those uncertain circumstances --- as if it were prohibited to pray for humankind in their time of suffering. If someone wants to criticize this action, then know that I accept responsibility for this. With a clear conscience I celebrated the Eucharist and asked the Lord to be merciful toward this family in their time of desperation and also prayed for the reappearance of a person who has been unjustly captured and now has disappeared.

My sisters and brothers, we can analyze many other events in the same light. We never want to distance ourselves from any of your concerns or the concerns of your family. Your trials and hopes and joys and tears are intimately bound up in the heart of the Church. Since it is impossible to enlighten, one by one, each of the circumstances of such an exuberant life, I simply ask you to analyze these situations in light of the Word of God and Christian love and not with resentment or hatred or violence. Indeed, for Christians, the only criteria are faith and love and the Word of God. For this reason we gather together each Sunday to discover and learn the eternal message of God. We do not come here to listen to the bishop or the priest, but rather to discover the message of God that is transmitted by the humble words of this, your servant. Let us not adopt an attitude that despises this human word that can also lead to despising my person and my actions, for Christ guarantees all preachers: *Whoever listens to you, listens to me. Whoever rejects you rejects me* (b).

My sisters and brothers, your faith will allow you to discern when there is human conflict and disagreement. Thousands of times I have invited you in these situations to enter into dialogue and as the Gospel says *admonish one another* (c). Through sincere dialogue and reflection you will discover God's plan.

Life of the Church

Through dialogue, the Church tries to become more authentic. In fact the steps that we have taken to build up the Archdiocese in collaboration with the beloved priests and religious and laity who are more and committed to the Church and convinced of the fact that they are Church --- these steps are rooted in this reflection on God's Word and dialogue. Next Sunday, September 26th, the Holy Father, Paul VI with a clear mind and with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, will celebrate his 80th birthday. All of the speculation by reporters as to whether the Pope is too old to carry on his responsibility or whether he should retire is not theirs to discern. The Pope can speak in the same words as Saint Paul: *...an apostle not from human beings nor through a human being but through Jesus Christ and God the Father* (d). In time and with a clear conscience, the Pope will know whether he should hand over his authority or carry the heavy cross of the Papacy to the end of his life. Next Sunday we will offer the 8:00am Mass here in the cathedral for the birthday of the Pope. We will ask the Lord to preserve him and give him light so that he might exercise the responsibility of this difficult office. So I ask you to offer special prayers for the Pope all during this week.

Next Saturday, the 24th, we will install the Episcopal-Vicar in Chalatenango. Beginning this morning at 9:00am, nine religious women will begin a spiritual evangelization process throughout the city. This process will be centered in three churches: El Calvario, San Antonio and the parish church. It will culminate on Friday with a Penance Service. We call all the Catholics of this city and the Department of Chalatenango to participate in this purification of their conscience next Friday evening in the parish Church of Chalatenango. Then on Saturday morning at 10:00am we invite all of you to participate in this new pastoral

initiative, the installation of the Episcopal-Vicar. As I have previously explained, in this situation the bishop decentralizes his authority and delegates his episcopal authority to another, in this case Father Fabián Amaya. The Vicar, then, in communion with the bishop and with the collaboration of the priests, will organize and carry forward a more effective apostolate in the devoted Department that has given the Church so many vocations.

The vicariate of Resurrección, which encompasses the greater number of the parishes of San Salvador, is very much alive and active. In the church of San Francisco they have initiated a course on Faith Based Communities that develops the laity and then sends them forth to create these basic units of the Church, small communities where gospel reflection, the life of Christian love, and community life are lived more intimately and made more human. All Catholics are called to collaborate in this work of creating communities and living their baptismal priesthood in communion with other Christians with whom they share the responsibility of living out this commitment to Jesus' gospel.

There are many other activities that I could speak about, but I have said enough and you now have the idea that the Church, despite many difficulties, desires to respond to her vocation that the Lord has called her to live in these circumstances. In this way the Church can be the more authentic Church of Jesus Christ. For she does not seek security in human power but rather elevates all that is human toward the power of the gospel that is then expressed in freedom, a spirit of poverty and confidence and love of God --- this is the Church's value and power.

Here I want to focus on today's readings. As you see, all of these realities and the realities that each one of you could enumerate --- all of this must be seen in light of the Gospel. All the events of history are directed toward a culmination with the Lord of history, Christ our Lord. *All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be* and Saint Paul told the Christians: *all belong to you; but you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God* (e). This morning's reading of the Divine Word presents us with this hierarchy.

A background of injustice

First some background for this injustice. The bishop's in Medellín did not invent injustice. The voice that speaks in the first reading today is very vigorous and strong. Amos was a prophet who had been called from his solitary life in the desert of Judea where he lived as a *campesino*. He did not want to be a prophet (the role of the prophet is very difficult), nevertheless he obeyed because God insisted that he take up this role. During this time the Kingdom of the North, Israel, flourished --- perhaps it was at the height of its glory during the reign of King Jeroboam II. The terrible voices of Assyria in the north and Egypt in the south had been silenced. These were times of peace and tranquillity. But the people did not take advantage of this peace that God had given them and created disorder. It seems as though times of calmness created an atmosphere for abuses in business relationships. Thus the prophet enters this scene of extortion. The rich wanted everything and so the rich were becoming richer and the poor were becoming poorer. Religion itself had become commercialized and people no longer observed the Law of Moses concerning the new moon and the Sabbath (a time to rest and refrain from business) --- instead they plotted how to do more business and further exploit people. Amos speaks to these unjust people who had made religion a source for their wealth: *Hear this, you who trample upon the needy and destroy the poor of the land! "When will the new moon be over," you ask, "so that we may sell our grain, and the Sabbath, that we may display our wheat"* (f). They did not think about God,

but thought only of their wheat and grain and how to exploit people. So the prophet continued [*You say:*] “*We will diminish the ephah, add to the shekel, and fix our scales for cheating! We will buy the lowly man for silver, and the poor man for a pair of sandals; even the refuse of the wheat we will sell!*” (g). They will sell even the wheat chaff and the corn husks to make money. The prophet calls attention to this attitude when he says: *The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Never will I forget a thing they have done!* (h).

The prophet finds his support in God who has sent him to denounce injustice. My sisters and brothers, in face of the difficulties in denouncing injustice, the prophets were fearful of revenge. But at the same time, they trusted in God: *I am with you!* (i), God said to the prophets, *because when they exploit the poor and the needy I am offended and exploited.* God suffers because his love is offended.

In today’s gospel Jesus speaks and denounces the injustice of an unfaithful administrator. Many times administrators can be crueller than the owners. Those who have shared the life of the poor who work on extensive plantations have experienced some fanatical administrators who abuse the workers and fire them from their jobs in order to gain favor with the owner. We experience this in Aguilares where they say, *Let the bishop give you work! Let the priests give you work!* This type of ridicule is offensive to the dignity of the human person.

My sisters and brothers, in Medellin, the bishops spoke out against these situations: *There are in existence many studies of the Latin American people. The misery that besets large masses of human beings in all of our countries is described in all of these studies. That misery, as a collective fact, expresses itself as injustice which cries to the heavens* (j). These are words that form part of the magisterium of the Latin American Church. This situation of injustice that cries out to the heavens cannot continue and we must contribute to their transformation and change these unjust structures. Not everyone will contribute in the same way because each person’s situation is different, but each one must contribute to this effort. Today’s readings point out some effective ways to do this and speak of the importance of ideas. A Christian must be one who fights with ideas and not with violence. I never tire of saying: the only violence that Christians can resort to is the violence of the cross of Jesus Christ because he allowed himself to be crucified in order to establish a more just world. Therefore we must use the violence of the cross to conquer our selfishness and avarice and jealousy, and thus engrave in our hearts these saving attitudes and ideas that the Divine Word offers us in today’s readings.

The relative value of temporal goods

In the first place, let us reflect on the relative value of material and temporal goods and God’s judgment concerning these realities. Look at how the parable begins: *A rich man had a steward who was reported to him for squandering his property. He summoned him and said, “What is this I hear about you? Prepare a full account of your stewardship, because you can no longer be my steward”* (k). This is an indirect reference to Christ who proclaims that the goods of the world are gifts from God and the human person possesses these gifts as an administrator. God, the owner, will ask every administrator, co-owner, and landowner for an accounting of these goods. The judgment of God awaits us and Jesus presents the moral of this parable when he congratulates the unjust administrator for his prudence and says: *the children of this world are more prudent in dealing with their own generation than are the children of the light* (l), and invites us to *make friends for ourselves with dishonest wealth, so*

that when it fails, we will be welcomed into eternal dwellings (m). We cannot deny the fact that temporal goods have a value. The Second Vatican Council affirms this fact when they affirm that everything created by God has an independent value, that is, an independence in the sense that all these goods have a value in themselves but must always maintain their connection with God. In the eyes of God, the values of history and the world are relative values. Their value must be viewed in light of the way in which these goods fulfill the plan of God (n). We might ask: what is God's plan?

Jesus, the absolute wealth

Today's second reading has a very rich content. I invite you to reflect, in your homes, on this passage where God describes his plan: *For there is one God. There is also one mediator between God and the human race, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself as a ransom for all* (o). This is the true absolute for Christians. To gain Christ one must be willing to lose everything. On a recent Sunday, Jesus told us: *If anyone comes to me without hating his family, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple* (p). Those who create an idol of money have made money an absolute. They are creating a god, a golden calf, in whose name they give orders to kill others in order to preserve this situation. Yet as Christians, the only absolute is God and Christ. The only wealth that is worth losing everything else for is the One who paid the price of redemption with his life. What does it profit to gain the world and lose one's life? What does it profit to gain all the goods of the earth through means of extortion as described by the prophet Amos, if now, like the rich Epulon who is subjected to the fires of hell, he laments the fact that he did not administer those goods in a better way? (q)

Therefore, my sisters and brothers, the Church exists to communicate salvation to humankind. As Saint Paul says: *God... wills everyone to be saved* (r). This is what God desires: that all be saved. The Church and the gospel are pained when people create an idol of money and turn their backs to God. This is the road to perdition and they will be condemned. The Church wants these people to repent and be converted and return to the only true God. She preaches to them about the fallacy of finding happiness in material goods, because as today's parable reminds us, everything remains behind at the time of death: *make friends for yourselves with dishonest wealth, so that when it fails, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings* (s). This is like the children who ask *which is greater, the moon or the volcano of San Salvador?* When children see the volcano close up, it appears very large and so they say: *the volcano is larger*. They are unable to understand that the moon, even though it is very distant and appears very small, is in reality much larger than the volcano.

The same can happen to us when we view material goods with myopic vision. Look at the prodigal son. (t) All the doors open to him when he has money. Everyone is his friend. But when the money is gone, he understands the moon is greater and that in his heart there is a more infinite and superior value than all worldly, created goods. These are the things that one must struggle for. Indeed, one gains Christ to the degree that one is detached from the goods of the earth and uses them as God desires.

I now call upon you, the laity, the majority of those who are listening to me --- you who are not priests and do not have as your vocation the obligation to serve in the ministry of God, you who are not religious and have not taken the three vows whereby you renounce worldly goods and pleasure and seek that which is higher. You my dear lay people remain in the world. The Council says that your life is interwoven among temporal goods (u). Therefore it is important to have defined criteria so that you give these goods their rightful

meaning. For there always exists the danger that as you live your life among worldly goods, you, yourselves, become worldly. For this reason it is necessary that baptized lay persons, who are called to administer these goods, have sound criteria that enable them to collaborate in transforming this world according to God's plan. Thus, the goods of this world will be better distributed and all will feel that they are children of God.

The covenant that God established with his Church is derived from all of this. Amos, the prophet, whom we encounter in the first reading and who is called in the Old Testament the prophet of social justice, says that he is most pained by the people who with their social distinctions, have become a sign that contradicts the covenant that they sealed with their God. We can say the same thing about the Christian community. These unjust inequalities, these masses of people who live in misery and cry out to the heavens, have become a sign that contradicts Christianity. Before God those who promote these injustices are saying that they believe more in the things of this world than in the covenant of love that they sealed with God --- a covenant that established the fact that we are all sisters and brothers.

If as a people we have made a covenant with God, then we have been given ethical standards that we must practice in our relations with God and others. We are truly God's children in as much as we live as brothers and sisters with one another and we lose this dignity when we no longer treat our neighbor as a sister or brother, when we extort our neighbor because we no longer see the neighbor as created in the image of God, no longer see the neighbor as a sister or brother (v). We have here a logic of theology that enables the Church to call herself the sacrament of unity --- unity of humankind with God and human persons among themselves.

The strength of prayer

Finally, my dear sisters and brothers, there is another great message in today's reading that speaks about another power that the Church and Christians have that enable them to create a better world. Without this power, all of our efforts are in vain. Saint Paul reminds us of this power with these very serious words: *First of all, then, I ask that supplications, prayers, petitions, and thanksgivings be offered for everyone, for kings and for all in authority that we may lead a quiet and tranquil life in all devotion and dignity* (w). At the end, he returns to this invitation to pray and says: *It is my wish, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands, without anger or argument* (x). Christians are asked to collaborate in this way, by seeking their strength in God, without whom they are nothing.

Pray for kings and for all in authority (y) As we look at the relationship between the government and the Church, I want to make it clear that I have not placed any excommunication on the government and I have never said that we should not pray for these government officials. I ask you now to pray for them, especially since the nation needs this calmness in order to live with honor and not with these concerns that occupy so much of our time. Pray for them so that we will never again have to announce here acts of bloodshed and violence and crime. It is necessary that government officials rely on God's help, for as the psalmist says: *Unless the Lord guard the city, in vain does the guard keep watch* (z). If the Lord does not build our civilization, in vain do people make plans behind God's back. Let all of us, but especially government officials, be mindful of God's plans. My dear sisters and brothers, we must pray to the Lord especially in these difficult times. It is as though God is testing us to see if we still trust in him or have separated ourselves from him.

Let us pray as Saint Paul says: *it is my wish, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands, without anger or argument* (a2). Would that the bloodstained hands in our land be lifted up in prayer to the Lord. Would that these people acknowledge the stains on their hands and ask for cleansing. But let those who, thanks to God, have clean hands --- the children, the sick, the suffering --- lift up their innocent and suffering hands to the Lord like the people of Israel in Egypt. The Lord will have pity and will say, as he did to Moses in Egypt, *I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers* (b2). It is a prayer that God cannot fail to hear.

My sisters and brothers, this is the Word that we have reflected on today and even though this Word was proclaimed seven centuries before Christ, it has great meaning for us today as we analyze the many injustices that surround us. Though the parable of Jesus was proclaimed to address a reality of that time, yet the parable is also most real for our times. It reminds us that a judgment awaits each one of us and we will be asked to render an account of our use of material things. We ought to imitate the sagacity of that administrator who made friends through fraud. The gospel is not praising fraud --- no, there are many interpretations of this passage. For example, during the time of Jesus, the administrators were slaves, and they obtained a profit on their investment by imposing high interest rates on the money and goods that they administered. Thus a slave could renounce these interest rates: *I forgive you the interest. Just pay what you owe the master*. This was fraud and it cannot be justified. What is justified and praised here is the sagacity and the astuteness of the administrator. He saw that a time of crisis was near and he would soon be lacking the material goods he needed. So he uses these goods and distributes them in a charitable way --- he does good in the way that he distributes these possessions. He administers these goods according to God's plan and therefore will receive a favorable judgment from God and will also have friends who will intercede on his behalf.

My sisters and brothers, the Word of God could not be more practical for our lives! We are concerned about material goods and we cannot live without them. Therefore, it is necessary that these goods be organized in a way that conforms to the plan of God. The Church, however, does not offer a sociological solution to this problem. Rather, through the light of the Gospel and faith, she illuminates the political, sociological and economic situation so that the people who use these goods might be inspired by God's judgments and plans and not by their own selfish interests. God created the world for all of us who are his children.

So now as children of God we draw near to the altar. Here at the altar let us lift up our hands and join together with Christ, our brother, who became man and victim because of his love for us. Let us lift up our clean or stained hands and pray with humble supplication: *Lord, have mercy on us!*

¹ Reference to Dr Carlos Alfaro Castillo, rector of the National University of El Salvador, assassinated 16 September 1977, together with Jorge López Argueta and Francisco Humberto Ramírez, employees of the same institution. See *El Diario de Hoy*, 17 September 1977.

² Reference to the "Dr José Matías Delgado" university founded on 15 September 1977. See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 16 September 1977.

³ David Agustín Cristales.

Margin References (a) 1 Tm 2,1: (b) Lk 10,16: (c) Mt 18,15-18: (d) Ga 1,1: (e) 1 Co 3,22-23: (f) Am 8,4-5: (g) Am 8,5-6: (h) Am 8,7: (i) Jr 1,8: (j) M 1,1: (k) Lk 16,1-2: (l) Lk 16,8: (m) Lk 16,9: (n) GS 36: (o) 1 Tm 2,5: (p) Lk 14,26: (q) Lk 16,24: (r) 1 Tm 2,4: (s) Lk 16,9: (t) Lk 15,13: (u) LG 31: (v) SC 26: (w) 1 Tm 2,1-2: (x) 1 Tm 2,8: (y) 1 Tm 2,2: (z) Ps 127,1: (a2) 1 Tm 2,8: (b2) Ex 3,7.