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GOD'S WORD IN THE WORLD

Twenty-fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time
18 September 1977

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

The object of preaching a homily is simply to announce to all of us who are reflecting on the word of God that this word is being accomplished today. The eternal word of the Lord becomes present among us today. It is not preached at Mass for demagogic reasons, as some have accused me of doing, nor is it preached because we are obsessed with persecution. Rather, we are seeking to enlighten with the eternal word of the Lord the reality in which our archdiocese moves. As members of this church we want to be able to judge the events of history not just with our personal criteria but with the light of the eternal word of the Lord which prevails forever.

Our personal opinions and judgments are fallible because they are human, but the word of the Lord cannot fail. That is why Christians must always learn to illuminate the passage of history and the events of their lives with the eternal word of the Lord. There are so many events in the dizzying history of our nation in these days that need to be illuminated with this word of eternal wisdom!

Events of the week

You have surely heard, for example, many commentaries about the assassination of the rector of the university and his two companions.¹ What we Christians must seek is not human judgments but the judgment of God. No doubt you have also heard many human commentaries about the establishment of a new university in our country.² What are the criteria and the motivations for this? It is not the human judgments that make an action right but the light of God's wisdom.

We continue to be saddened by the kidnapping of Mrs. Chiurato. This occurred thirteen days ago, and still nothing is known. Her family is greatly distressed, as are the families of so many other people who have disappeared. The hearts of Christians cannot be untouched by the suffering of other Christians, other families. If my voice is being heard over the radio by those who are responsible for this anguish, then I beg you in the name of Christ's love to negotiate the freedom of this poor woman. At the same time

¹ Reference to Dr. Carlos Alfaro Castillo, Rector of the National University of El Salvador, assassinated on 16 September 1977, together with Jorge López Argueta and Francisco Humberto Ramírez Benítez, 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).

that we are praying, the patients of the Divine Providence Hospital are offering special prayers for these distressing cases. They are the living heart of the church, fulfilling from the depths of sickness and suffering the command of Saint Paul: «Pray for the needs of humankind» (1 Tim 2:1).

Last Monday we prayed in the hospital chapel and celebrated Mass for that young man who had disappeared,³ the one whose mother was suffering because she did not know whether he was alive or dead. Some people wanted to prevent that Mass from being said, as if it were prohibited to pray for the anguish of humankind. If some blame is made to fall on those who attended that Mass, I ask that the full responsibility be assigned to me because in clear conscience I celebrated the Lord's sacrifice, asking the Lord to be merciful toward this family in their desperation and praying for the reappearance of a man who was unjustly disappeared.

We could analyze many other events in the same way, sisters and brothers. We are not unaware of the concerns of each of you and of your families. Your trials, your hopes, your joys and tears are not far from the heart of the church. Since it is impossible to enlighten each and every circumstance of a life as exuberant as that of Salvadorans, I simply ask you to analyze the diverse situations in the light of God's word and Christian love, not with resentment or hatred or violence. Learn how to interpret the events of our own lives. For Christians the only true criteria are faith and love, illumined by the word of the Lord. For this reason we come to Mass each Sunday, not to learn what the bishop or the priests says, but to discover the eternal message of God that is transmitted by the humble words of this human speaker. Let us not adopt an attitude that despises the one who is speaking, because I am not the real object of the criticisms that might be made of my actions or my words. Rather, I feel the assurance of the Christ who told his preachers, «Whoever listens to you, listens to me. Whoever rejects you rejects me» (Luke 10:16).

Your faith, sisters and brothers, will know how to discern whether there is some human intervention with which you are not in agreement. In such cases I have invited you countless times to offer dialogue and correction, as the Gospel commands (Matt 18:15-18). In the light of dialogue and sincere reflection we will discover what God thinks.

Life of the church

In this way the church is trying to become ever more authentic. In collaboration with our beloved priests and religious and with lay folk ever more committed and convinced that they are church, we are taking the following steps to build up our archdiocese. Next Monday, September 26, is the eightieth birthday of the Holy Father, Paul VI, who guides us with a clear mind and with the special assistance of the Holy Spirit. All the speculation of the newspapers as to whether he is too old or whether he will resign is beyond human discernment. Like Saint Paul, the pope can say that he is an apostle not by human will but by the will of the one who chose him (Gal 1:1). He will know in due time and with the clear conscience that distinguishes him whether it is necessary to

³ Reference to David Agustín Cristales.

hand over his authority or to keep carrying the heavy cross of the papacy until the end of his life. Next Sunday we will offer our 8:00 o'clock Mass for the birthday of the pope. We will ask the Lord to preserve him and especially to give him light to exercise the responsibility of that difficult office. So I ask you to offer special prayers for the pope all during this week.

Next Saturday the twenty-fourth will be the inauguration of the episcopal vicariate in Chalatenango. Beginning this morning at 9:00 o'clock, nine religious women will develop a spiritual evangelization program throughout the city. Three churches will serve as centers of evangelization: El Calvario, San Antonio, and the parish church. The program will culminate on Friday with a penance celebration. We therefore send out a call to all the Catholics of the city and the department of Chalatenango to participate in this purification of conscience next Friday evening in the parish church of Chalatenango. Then on Saturday morning at 10:00 o'clock we invite all of you to participate in this new initiative which is the pastoral vicariate. As I've previously explained, in this process the bishop decentralizes his authority and delegates a large part of his episcopal powers to a priest, who in this case is Father Fabián Amaya. Thus, the vicar, acting always in communion with the bishop and with the collaboration of the priests, will organize and carry forward a more effective apostolate in this fervent department that has given us so many vocations.

Also, the vicariate of Resurrección, which encompasses many of the parishes of San Salvador, is extremely alive and active. In the church of San Francisco there was a course on base communities, and as a result many lay people were motivated to create what are today the basic units of the church. In these small communities people reflect on the Gospel and practice lives of Christian love. Such communities make it possible for our lives to become more intimate and more human. All Catholics are now called to collaborate in this work of creating communities and living out their baptismal priesthood in communion with other Christians with whom they share the responsibility of commitment to the Gospel of Christ.

There are many other activities, but I have said enough to give us an idea of how the church of our archdiocese, despite the difficulties, seeks to be a church that responds to her vocation and to the Lord's call precisely in these circumstances. She strives every day to be more authentic as the church of Jesus Christ, not seeking support in human power but rather raising what is human toward the power of the Gospel, a power that finds expression in freedom, in a spirit of poverty, in a sense of confidence, and in love of God—this is precisely the church's value and power.

Here I want to focus on today's readings. As you can see, all these realities of our society and still others that each of you could enumerate cannot remain outside the light of the Gospel. All the events of history are directed toward a single apex, the Lord of history, Christ our Lord. By him and for him all things were created, as Saint Paul tells his Christians, «All belong to you; but you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God» (1 Cor 3:22-23). This is the hierarchy that this morning's reading of the divine word wants to teach us.

A background of injustice

First, there is a background of injustice. This is not an invention of the bishops at Medellín. The voice of today's first reading is even more vigorous and strong. It comes from a prophet who was taken out of the lonely desert of Judea where he lived as a *campesino*. He does not want to be a prophet of God, a very difficult calling, but he obeys at God's insistence. So he goes to the northern kingdom of Israel, which is flourishing and perhaps at the height of its glory during the reign of King Jeroboam II. The frightening voices of Assyria to the north and Egypt to the south have been silenced. These are times of prosperity, peace, and tranquility. But we humans do not know how to use well the peace that God gives us. We use it only to create disorder. Peaceful times lend themselves to abusive business practices. Thus the prophet enters this society where there is tremendous extortion and where the rich are hoarding everything so that they get even richer while the poor get poorer. In this society of unjust negotiations, religion itself has become commercialized. People no longer observe the law of Moses concerning the new moon and the Sabbath, which are times to rest and refrain from business. Instead, they are plotting better deals and further exploitation. Amos addresses these unjust Israelites who have made even religion a trampoline 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"» (Amos 8:4-5a). They are not thinking about God. They are thinking only about what will produce more wheat and grain for themselves. They are thinking about how to exploit people. So the prophet continues, «You diminish the ephah, you add to the shekel, and you fix your scales for cheating! You buy the lowly man for silver, and the poor man for a pair of sandals; even the refuse of the wheat you sell!» (Amos 8:5b-6). We would say they sell the bran of the rice and the wheat or even the corn husks, anything to make money. In the face of such an attitude the prophet calls one thing to mind: «The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: "Never will I forget a thing you have done!"» (Amos 8:7).

The prophet finds his support in God who sends him to denounce injustices. That is why, sisters and brothers, the prophets were fearful as they faced the difficult task of denouncing injustices: because vengeance is terrible. But at the same time they trusted in God who sustained them: «I will go with you», God said to the prophets, «because when they exploit the poor and the needy I am the one who is offended and exploited» (Jer 1:8). It is God who suffers because his love is also offended.

In today's gospel Jesus likewise speaks against the injustice of an unfaithful administrator. Often administrators are crueler than the owners themselves. Those of you who know how the poor live in the difficult circumstances of the plantations are aware of how fanatical some administrators are to please their bosses. They abuse and assault the poor workers, and they take away their jobs. For example, there in Aguilares they are saying, «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, at Medellín the bishops issued a document on justice in which they said, «There have already been many studies of the situation of Latin America. It is not necessary to say more. We need only conclude that the misery that besets the masses is an injustice which cries to the heavens» (M 1,1). These words form

part of the teaching of the Latin American church. There is a situation of injustice that cries out to the heavens, and this cannot continue. There is a need for transformation and for changes, and we all have to work to contribute to this effort. We will not all do so equally because not all of us hold the reins of the situations, but still each one must contribute. Today's readings point out some effective ways to do this, and they give us some ideas. A Christian must be a person who fights with ideas, not with violence. I never tire of repeating: if there is to be violence, the only violence is that of Christ on the cross, for he let himself be killed so that there would be a more just world. That is the violence that we must apply to ourselves, doing violence to our selfishness, our avarice, our envy. We have to overcome those blemishes in our hearts with these salutary ideas that today's divine word offers us.

The relative value of temporal goods

In the first place, let us consider the relative value of temporal goods and God's judgment concerning them. See how today's 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"» (Luke 16:1-2). What Christ is saying is that the goods of earth are from God. People possess them as stewards, and the owner will demand an account of every steward, every proprietor, and every landlord for as little or as much as they possess. They must say how they have administered the goods that God created for the welfare of all humankind. The judgment of God awaits us. When Christ presents the moral of his parable, he says that the master congratulated the unjust administrator for his shrewdness because «the children of this world are more prudent in dealing with their own generation than are the children of the light» (Luke 16:8). Jesus then tells us, «Make friends for ourselves with dishonest wealth, so that when it fails, we will be welcomed into eternal dwellings» (Luke 16:9). We do not deny that temporal goods have value. The Second Vatican Council affirms that everything created by God has a certain autonomy and value, but autonomy means that things are valuable for themselves, not that they should be separated from God. In the eyes of God, all the values of history and the world are relative. They are valuable only insofar as they fulfill the plan of God (GS 36). And what is the plan of God?

Jesus, the absolute wealth of humankind

Today's second reading is rich in content, sisters and brothers. I invite you to spend time reflecting on it in your homes, for in it God describes for us 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» (1 Tim 2:5). This is the true absolute for Christians: God and his Christ. Christ is the absolute wealth of humankind. To gain Christ we must be willing to lose everything. Christ himself told us on a recent Sunday, «If anyone comes to me without hating his family, and even his own life, he is not worthy of me» (Luke 14:26). All those who create an idol of money have made money an absolute. They create a god, a golden calf, and they prostrate themselves before it and offer sacrifice. They will even have people killed in order to preserve this situation. The only value for Christians is God and Christ. The only wealth for which it is worth losing everything else is the One who paid the price of my redemption with his life. What does it profit you to gain the whole world and in the end to lose your life?

What use is it to enjoy all the goods of the earth obtained through extortion—as described today by the prophet Amos—if you now are regretful, like the rich man who has been sunk into the fires of hell for administering his wealth badly? (Luke 16:24).

Therefore, my sisters and brothers, the church exists for the salvation of all, as Saint Paul has told us, «God . . . wills everyone to be saved» (1 Tim 2:4). This is what God desires: the salvation of all. The church and the Gospel are pained when people create an idol of money and turn their backs on God, for such people are on the road to perdition and will be condemned. Because the church wants them to be converted to the one true God, she preaches to them about the fallacy of the things of earth and all that remains behind. As today's parable tells us, since everything will be left behind, we must find friends who will receive us into eternal dwellings (Luke 16:9). Some will say, «But heaven is far off. Here is where life is to be enjoyed». They are like children who are asked, «Which is greater, the moon or the volcano of San Salvador?» When they see the volcano close up, it appears very large and so they say, «The volcano is larger». Since the moon is so far away, the distance prevents them from seeing that it is really much larger.

The same can happen also with our myopic vision of temporal goods. When we possess them, all doors are open to us, as with the prodigal son in his glory days (Luke 15:13). While there is money, everybody is our friend, but when the money is all gone, we understand that the moon is greater. We understand that in the human heart there is an infinite value which exceeds that of all created, temporal goods. We must struggle to have a heart that has won Christ precisely to the extent that it is detached from the goods of earth and uses them as God desires.

Here I want to make a call to you laypeople, sisters and brothers. Most of you listening to me are not priests who by vocation are called to God's ministry, nor are you religious sisters or brothers who by vocation take their three vows and seek the higher good. You remain in the world. The Council says that your life is interwoven with temporal goods (LG 31) so that you need to have excellent criteria for giving things their true meaning. There is the very great danger that by living among worldly goods you yourselves become worldly. That is why you baptized lay Christians who are called to administer temporal goods must have sound criteria. Your vocation is to make this world conform to God's plan so that the world's goods are better distributed and all people feel that they are children of God.

This vocation also derives from the covenant that God made with his church. In the Old Testament, Amos was called the prophet of social justice because what most grieved him was that his people were flouting the covenant that they had made with God by insisting on all their social distinctions. We can say the same thing about the Christian people. These unjust inequalities and these massive miseries cry out to heavens, and they are a sign that contradicts our Christianity. They are witnessing to God that we believe more in earthly things than in the covenant of love that we have sealed with him, a covenant by which all men and women should feel that they are brothers and sisters.

If as a people we have made a covenant with God, then we have an ethic by which God is measuring our relationship with him. We are truly God's children to the extent

that we are brothers and sisters to one another, and we are less God's children when we no longer treat others as neighbors, when we exploit them because we do not see them as images of God and as our brothers and sisters. We have here a true theological logic that derives from God and is imparted to humanity and the church. It is called the «sacrament of unity», the unity of humankind with God and of human beings with one another.

The power of prayer

Finally, dear sisters and brothers, another great message in today's reading speaks about a tremendous power that the church and Christians have, one they must also use to create a better world. Without this power all of our human 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» (1 Tim 2:1-2). At the end of the passage Paul returns to this invitation to pray and says, «It is my wish, then, that you should pray in every place, lifting up holy hands, without anger or argument» (1 Tim 2:8). Christians collaborate by finding their strength in God, without whom they are nothing.

Let us pray «for kings and for all in authority» (1 Tim 2:2). Sisters and brothers, the position of the church with respect to the government does not mean she has excommunicated the government or stopped praying for it. Even now I ask you to pray for government officials, especially at this time when the nation most needs calmness so that people can live honorably and not suffer anxieties. Not a week passes that we do not have to announce here acts of bloodshed and violence and crime. We therefore need an authority that relies on God's help, as the psalmist says, «Unless the Lord guard the city, in vain does the guard keep watch» (Ps 127:1). If the Lord does not build our civilization, in vain do people make plans behind God's back. Let all of us take our Lord into account, including you who are government officials. All of us, dear sisters and brothers, must pray hard to the Lord, all the more so in these difficult times. It is as though God is testing us to see whether we still trust in him or whether we have cut off our relations with him.

But in our prayer, says Saint Paul, we must lift up clean hands (1 Tim 2:8). God also hears sinners who lift up their blood-soaked hands. Would that all those hands stained with blood would be lifted up to the Lord in horror at their stains and ask that he cleanse them. But those who, thanks be to God, have clean hands—the children, the sick, the afflicted—let them lift up their innocent, suffering hands to the Lord as did the people of Israel in Egypt, and the Lord will have pity and will say, as he said to Moses, «I have heard the cry of my people in their pain». This is the prayer that God cannot fail to hear.

My sisters and brothers, this is the word that we have reflected on today, and as you can see, it fits our situation perfectly. Even though it comes from a prophet who preached seven centuries before Christ, it has direct meaning for our people who face so many injustices today. Even though the parable is about a system of Christ's time, it becomes real for our day. It warns us that a judgment of God awaits each one of us, and we will be asked to render an account of our administration. We should imitate the

shrewdness of that administrator who made friends for himself through fraud. Mind you, the gospel is not praising fraud—there are many interpretations of this passage. For example, some say that in the time of Christ the administrators were slaves who earned their wages by imposing high interest rates on the things they administered. Thus this man could renounce his own surcharges: «I forgive you the interest. Just pay what you owe the master». Accordingly, there was not really any fraud. But even if there was fraud, that is not being justified here. What is justified and even praised here is the administrator's shrewdness and his astuteness in planning ahead at a moment of crisis. The lesson for us is that since we will not always have these material goods, for they are not eternal, we must use them now to help others and do good; we must administer them as God wishes. Then we will find God's judgment favorable, and there will be friends to intercede for us.

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. That is why it is necessary that these goods be organized better, as God requires. The church does not offer a sociological solution but rather the light of the Gospel and the light of faith. With the light of faith she illuminates political, sociological, and economic factors so that those who administer these things may be inspired by God's judgment and God's plans and not by their own selfish interests. For God created the world for all of us who are his children.

So now as children of God we draw near to the altar of the Lord. United to Christ our brother who became man and became victim out of love for us, let us lift up our hands, whether clean or stained, and pray with humble supplication: «Lord, have mercy on us!»