

Fourth Sunday – February 1, 2015

I smiled when I read the refrain from today's responsorial psalm: "If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts." If we say this refrain aloud a couple of times, exaggerate the rhythm a bit, we'll soon notice it has a great beat. I mention this psalm refrain to call attention to one of Pope Francis' great contributions so far. He uses simple words and striking images in his preaching, and he keeps it short.

We know the mind can absorb only what the seat can endure. Brevity reminds me of a priest from another diocese who died recently. Here is one of his best homilies, in its entirety. "If today you heard God's voice, harden not your hearts. And if today you don't hear God's voice, you'd better ask yourself, why not." That's it; that's the homily. As with any proper homily, it was based on Scripture's popular responsorial psalm 95. It was also short enough to be memorable and has the power to come to mind whenever one hears the line from the Psalms. It makes one think.

How important are homilies? Research on parishes has found that more than six out of ten people (63%) consider the quality of the preaching when they choose where to attend Mass. It's more important to them than the quality of the parish music and only slightly less important than the sense of community and welcome they feel when they go to the church.

"If today you hear God's voice" suggests that God begins the conversation. How do we hear the divine voice? In many ways: through prayer, through Scripture, through the wonders of creation, through the joys and sorrows, pains and pleasures, challenges and mysteries of our daily lives. The word "if" in the refrain reminds us to be attentive. Hearing God's voice is not automatic.

Finally, the second part of the refrain: "Harden not your hearts." The truth is we can ignore or resist God's voice. We need to keep our hearts soft, pliable, and compassionate – like Jesus' heart in the Gospel.

Listening and compassion need to be the essential rhythm of our lives. "If today you hear God's voice, harden not your hearts. And if today you don't hear God's voice, you'd better ask yourself, why not."