

# Speak Words that Will Rouse Us

*A clarion call to become a world-loving church this Lent*

By GABE HUCK

Enough of namby-pamby and the feel-good and the little moral tales and anecdotes. If you are preaching Lent and the whole paschal season in a rural area or in Los Angeles, in a college or a hospital, to the wealthy or the very poor, ask if it isn't way past time to take hold and — you first — start moving toward the church that the Second Vatican Council envisioned. 30 or so years ago, the church, especially in the U.S., was quietly arrested as the compliant and unimaginative were placed in leadership. Then the vision of Vatican II was overshadowed by scandals. We were barely on our way.

Well, homilists, enough blah blah, enough reruns, enough entertainment. You don't have to apologize, but take hold and ponder. I suggest you begin, as Lent approaches in 2017, to meet weekly with people who can tell you the truth about what needs to be pondered before you put words on your homily. Together struggle with the demands of the season and the Scriptures weeks before each Sunday is upon us.

I can try in my own cranky way to push you along, any of you that still want to hear (and your comment is always welcome at the email listed below this essay). Last year's politics and elections were a strong telling that the church is out of it, lost, leaderless and close to Gospel-less. I'm not talking about bombast and "father knows best;" I'm talking about study, reading, gathering to struggle together with the task at hand. Maybe you are way ahead in this. But check now and then to be sure. The minutes you have to publicly ponder Scripture and sacrament and season are too precious to squander.

What shall we be thinking about as we approach Lent and Triduum and the 50 days of Easter this year? The passages heard during this paschal time offer us, if we attend to them, a



sense for why these days are different from other days of the year. Yet, as at the Seder, it must be asked and answered again. It must be talked about at table and written about in private then shared with others. Wrestle with the signs that we busily want to ignore. Call us to honesty and know that you need that honesty as much as any of us.

The presence of catechumens in our midst, their initiation, what they seek and how they challenge us, is itself one way that Lent, Triduum and Easter-time have become a life-giving force in many parishes. The first two generations of the post-Vatican II church took to heart the charge to make of our church's Lenten seasons, Easter vigils and paschal seasons something the church had not known for many centuries. Doing this each year, we likely have encountered how Gospel, baptism, Eucharist and church call out for engagement of us all. These by-heart rituals, if they are worthy of that name in a local church's life, are the church becoming itself, practicing in ritual what we are responsible for in a world God loves more than we do. The time of exorcism and embrace can be now what they were in the early churches: confrontation with all that is harmful to the fabric of our communities and the health of the planet itself, recognizing and naming what's going on and for whose enrichment. We can determine to embrace such a

way, slowly learned, of being church.

In such engagement with each other and Scripture and ritual, we discover how ill-suited we are in these times for this engagement in conversion and initiation to world-loving lives. We discover, confront and confess how we have so exhausted ourselves in the businesses of other entities that claim us. What use it is if we see all this stuff of church and prayer and Eucharist as nothing more than a file on a computer screen next to other documents titled "my job," "my health," "my hopes," "my family" and such. Worse, we come to think, articulated or not, that this is okay, it is the way the world works now.

What we are looking for in the seasons ahead, Lent and Triduum and Easter, are not pages in yet another folder to be reviewed and repeated each year. If these rites that ask us to name ourselves, our church, survive at all, they will survive because we took them as the air we breathe here and now, the life-shaping deeds that will let us embody and be challenged to ponder what's wrong — wrong and unjust in the church as well as the economy, wrong in the brutalizing of the earth, wrong when we actually do believe that God blesses America (or any other country). Can we, Sunday by Sunday, feel our way toward being the church and loving the world as God loves the world?

And what is that world-loving church in 2017 in our nation, our politics, our economy? We can talk about it in pondering the Scriptures of the Lent and Easter seasons. We can confront it among Scripture texts and scrutinies and renunciations and baptisms. We can confront what we've resisted before and risk realizing we have choices to make. We can edge forward to the place where we ponder together how first-world power — military and economic — is what we've loosed on our own poor and much of the world. We can celebrate diversity,

examine what we are buying with our taxes, demand equality and break down those awful walls. We can ask why it is that Catholic Relief Services and Catholic Charities exist not only because the poor are always with us but because of our unwillingness to welcome the very people described in Emma Lazarus's poem on the Statue of Liberty. We can little by little begin to find the Gospel and Scripture as a bold challenge to create a community that struggles to name and to reject false gods and their promises.

The keeping of Lent, of the Triduum and of the Easter season is a time to wake to reality, ours and the world's, ours and that of the church. None of us alone can see the way through the challenge we face. We live our lives too often as somehow detached from a whole litany of troubles. We know inside us perhaps that in these times it is not enough to be a good parent and a good neighbor. Francis, the bishop of Rome, is clear about this, whether he speaks of mercy or justice, climate change or unjust economic policies. He does the homework. He takes chances. The world he sees and embraces is in trouble and he keeps saying so. He isn't putting time into petty squabbles but into the life of the world. His eyes are open. And he joins his work to that of other workers who see what must be rejected and what embraced, and how urgent are the rejecting and the embracing.

How shall we face this paschal season, this almost impossible challenge of the Passover for which death is the sharpest metaphor? And well it might be for us who stake our lives on the Gospel. Our lifetime is the age of knowing what we've done to the possibility of continuing human life on this planet. We know! Who even pretends that divine intervention will bring us through, or that some modest recycling and a bit of solar power will be enough to keep earth a home for more than a few more generations? And who would claim that we rich nations are not the culprits? What do we have to say, urged and compelled by the Gospel?

Are we amazed that the bishop of

Rome, after a few years of speaking out, of lamenting the refugees and the economic crimes that know nothing of human rights, of speaking plainly to the wealthy and the racists among us, and most remarkably of showing that he still loves us all—after all this, is it surprising that Francis is fading from the press? He's a Romero for the poor of the world, and many of the bishops have hardened their hearts to him. What part should Francis have in our Lent? Francis doesn't coddle the North American church. He clearly recognizes that if the church has a role and a future, it isn't in the northern part of the world, nor the so-called western world, but in the churches of Asia and Africa and Latin America. That's as it should be, but what should we be in this renewal of the vision birthed at Vatican II?

So let's look for a few moments at the four Sundays of February. As we prepare these Sundays that lead up to Ash Wednesday on March 1 consider these Scriptures, words that ought to rouse us:

- ❖ If you remove from your midst oppression ... bestow your bread on the hungry and satisfy the afflicted ... the gloom shall become for you like midday.
- ❖ We speak a wisdom to those who are mature, not a wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age who are passing away.
- ❖ You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.
- ❖ Let those who are considered wise in this age become fools, so as to become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in the eyes of God.
- ❖ No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and mammon ... Learn from the way the wild flowers grow.

What would we hear if we pondered these passages with truth-telling companions? Such hours of opening up the texts, including the inspiration of the psalms, can give the preacher insights anyone working alone could never imagine. These conversations may surface other poetry and prose,

texts known to one or more in the group. This is important dialogue.

The homilist speaks not to an audience but to the church assembled. The dialogue starts here.

## WORDS

... use words, but, in addition to using them to explain, expound, exhort, use them to evoke, to set us dreaming as well as thinking, to use words as at their most prophetic and truthful, the prophets used them to stir in us memories and longings and intuitions that we starve for without knowing that we starve. ... use words which do not only try to give answers to the questions that we ask or ought to ask but which help us to hear the questions that we do not have words for asking and to hear the silence that those questions rise out of and the silence that is the answer to those questions.

—From *Telling the Truth*  
by Frederick Buechner

I know that many are scandalized at this word and want to accuse it of forsaking the preaching of the gospel to meddle in politics. I do not accept that accusation. I make an effort for us not merely to have on paper all that Vatican Council II and the meetings at Medellin and Puebla have tried to further, but to translate it, preaching the gospel as it should be preached for our people in this conflict-ridden reality. I ask the Lord during the week while I receive the cries of the people and the sorrow of so much crime, the disgrace of so much violence, to give me the fitting word to console, to denounce, to call to repentance.

—Oscar Romero, quoted in *The Word Remains: A Life of Oscar Romero* by James Brockman. The text is from Romero's homily on March 23, 1980. Romero was assassinated the next day.

Gabe Huck lives in New York City. Contact him at gabeandtheresa@gmail.com.