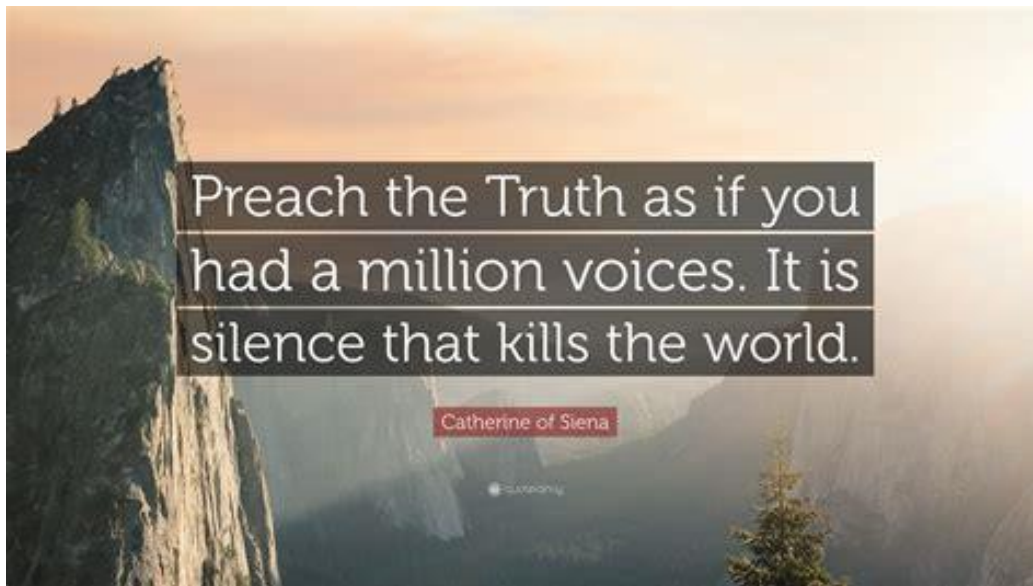


**FROM FATHER JOHN:** *“When the LORD brought back the captives of Zion, we were like men dreaming. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with rejoicing. Then they said among the nations, ‘The LORD has done great things for them.’ The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad indeed. Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the torrents in the southern desert. Those that sow in tears shall reap rejoicing. Although they go forth weeping, carrying the seed to be sown, They shall come back rejoicing, carrying their sheaves.” ~ Psalm 126*

***The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy!!!***



St. Gregory the Great wrote that ***“Anyone ordained a priest undertakes the task of preaching, so that with a loud cry he may go on ahead of the terrible judge who follows. If, then, a priest does not know how to preach, what kind of cry can such a dumb herald utter?”*** (The Pastoral Guide by St. Gregory the Great, pope)

St. Gregory was elected Pope at age 50 on September 3, 590 served until his death on March 12, 604. He is one of three popes (along with St. Leo the Great and St. Nicolas the Great) to receive the title “the Great.”

As Pope, St Gregory accomplished many things. He emptied the papal treasury to ransom prisoners of the Lombards and to care for persecuted Jews and the victims of plague and famine. He sent 40 monks from his own monastery to England which brought about the conversion of England. He reformed the Liturgy and was largely responsible for Gregorian Chant which was named after him.

His book, *The Pastoral Guide*, concerned the duties and qualities of bishops and was read for centuries after his death. He described bishops mainly as physicians whose main duties were preaching and the enforcement of discipline. He worked to reform and educate the clergy. He removed unworthy priests from office. And, he emphasized the importance of good preaching.

I quoted St. Gregory the Great (above) because Bishop Hicks most recent monthly Column is entitled *The Art of Preaching* and describes how preaching has impacted him and his ministry as the Bishop of Joliet. Here is Bishop Hick's article.

"I love to preach. I love it! That may sound odd to you, especially since public speaking is one of the greatest fears in the world, partly because we become anxious about looking silly and being judged or rejected. Yet, every time I approach the pulpit, I am humbled and overjoyed to break open the Word of God and try to connect it to our daily lives.

While I am able to share my love for preaching now, I must admit that when I entered the seminary, I thought to myself, 'I am not sure how I am ever going to preach!' Not only did I wonder how I would conquer my fear and stage fright, but I also questioned, 'How am I going to come up with new and relevant material day after day?'

Thankfully at the seminary, my homiletics' teacher was wise, brilliantly creative and humble. He encouraged me and my fellow seminarians to find our own voice. He gently helped us to develop our own authentic style instead of trying to pretend to be someone we were not.

Admittedly, my confidence has grown over the years. Yet there still remains the daily task of thinking of what to say. People have noticed over the years that when someone is telling a story in normal conversation, I will often say, 'Now, that would make a good homily!' I am constantly listening to others and their experiences, keeping track of how I might share them in my preaching one day. In other words, I keep my eyes and ears open to the world around me and then try to connect those examples to Scripture and the spiritual life.

Before preaching, I also use the ancient tradition of '*lectio divina*' which Pope Benedict XVI referred to as 'prayerful listening to the Word of God.' Basically, this four-step process of praying over Scripture includes: 1) Reading (*lectio*) 2) Meditation (*meditatio*) 3) Prayer (*oratio*) 4) Contemplation (*contemplatio*). The process allows me to move beyond myself and my own interpretation by encountering God, who is behind, in and beyond the text.

In other words, by using *lectio divina*, I try to avoid preaching about the 'Gospel according to me' and instead break open the Scriptures according to the 'Word of the Lord.'

I remember this past Advent season, I started thinking about my Christmas homily. I wanted to share something fresh and relevant as the new bishop of Joliet. Yet, with all my reading, conversations and prayer, I was dry. Nothing! I started to think to myself, 'Maybe I will just have to dust off a homily from a Christmas past?' Then, two days before Christmas Eve, I was doing my morning Holy Hour before the Blessed Sacrament and I said to Jesus, 'I have nothing to preach about on Christmas. Please help me.' My prayer was answered almost instantly. Within two minutes of my asking the Lord for his help, he sent the Holy Spirit to me and deposited in my head a homily from beginning to end, which I joyfully preached two days later at our Cathedral of St. Raymond Nonnatus.

Please know that most of my prayer petitions are not answered so quickly or so precisely. But I wanted to share that personal experience with you to remind all of us that Jesus is real and that God wants the best for us. He truly knows and loves us and wants us to know and love Him.

While I always try to preach well, I am aware of my own shortcomings and regret the times that I was not as good as I would have liked to have been or when I gave less than what the people of God deserve. I think most of us desire good preaching and long to be fed by the Word of God. I wholeheartedly agree with Pope Francis, who said, 'The homily can actually be an intense and happy experience of the Spirit, a consoling encounter with God's word, a constant source of renewal and growth.' (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 135)

One last thought ... remember that we all preach. Most preaching does not come from a pulpit at Mass. Instead, we communicate much by our daily words, attitudes and actions. By raising our minds and hearts in prayer to God, let us all strive to preach well and follow the wise words of St. Teresa of Avila, 'We must all try to be preachers through our deeds.'"

May God Bless you and all those who love the Lord.

