

8/25&26/12

21st Sunday of Ordinary Time

All Saints Parish

Fr. Fred Daley

The Bible: A Very Dangerous Book

My sisters and brothers,

[While holding up The Bible] This is The Bible:

- the Book we read and reflect upon at every Mass;
- the Book, which - in its Second Testament texts - is the primary source of the knowledge we have about our brother, Jesus;
- the Book that Jews and Christians have been honoring and using through the centuries;

and yet, this Book is the most - or one of the most - dangerous Books ever written! A Book that has been used and continues to be used to promote anti-Semitism, sexism, racism, homophobia, slavery, economic injustice, and oppression, hatred, violence, genocide, war, the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Holocaust, Colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism, and the list goes on....

We have an example of what I'm talking about in our Second Reading today, from St. Paul to the Ephesians:

"Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord. The husband is head of his wife just like Christ is head of the Church. As the Church is subordinate to Christ, so wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything."

Even our hierarchy is embarrassed about these lines in Scripture and in the official Lectionary, those lines are bracketed off so that the Presider can skip them ..., which I was very tempted to do today!

We can chuckle and yet these lines from St. Paul in the Bible have been used by men to oppress women, discriminate against women and use violence against women, for centuries....

These lines from St. Paul that have been mis-read and misinterpreted and abused for centuries right to this day, are vivid reminders that we as Christians, as Catholics, as people of the Book, have a moral obligation and deep responsibility to know and understand the meaning of the Bible - so that it can be a beautiful source of grace and light and meaning; a source of liberation to deepen our Faith. But that is often easier said than done.

The Second Vatican Council in Dei Verbum (The Word of God) states in ¶ 12:

“Seeing that in Sacred Scripture God speaks through people, it follows that the interpretation of Sacred Scripture should carefully search out the meaning the sacred writers had in mind.”

But many of us as Catholics feel inadequate and even ignorant about the Bible and shy away from it because we really don't know much about it. Historically this makes sense because from the time of the Council of Trent to the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, Catholic laity were told not to read and study the Bible - for a lot of complicated reasons, one being it was a sure way for the Hierarchy to keep the people under control in that old “pay, pray and obey mentality.”

Put another way: for centuries, it was only those with power in the church (most often white, celibate males) who had the opportunity to study scripture and interpret it, often to their own advantage.

A second problem is that up until relatively recent times much of the Christian world interpreted the Bible literally. It was thought that God somehow tapped the biblical writers on the shoulder and said: “Start writing.” A literal, fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible has led to the many abuses of the Bible that have been mentioned. It would be as if 1,000 years from now, scholars excavating in this upstate area found

an 'ancient' copy of the Post-Standard dated 2012, and in translating the document, determined that it stated the astounding fact that it had "rained cats and dogs..."; until a scholar more thoroughly familiar with the literary conventions of the time clarified that what was actually meant was simply that it had rained very hard. Those who interpret the Bible literally would say that we must accept the Creation Stories of the Book of Genesis literally: that God created the Universe in six days and rested on the seventh, thus denying the Theory of Evolution.

A third problem or abuse of the Bible that has been used to justify just about anything is what is called "proof texting:" taking a line out of context as "proof" to make a point. This is also a great technique in political ads, as we are watching currently: where one opponent will take a line from the other candidate - pull it out of its full context and play it over and over again on television...! One illustration involves the observation made by most competent scripture scholars, that the six places in Sacred Scripture that refer to homosexuality and used time and again to condemn it, in fact say nothing about sexual orientation as we understand it today,

My sisters and brothers, all this sounds rather pessimistic - but the rest of the story is wonderful news, good news indeed! Today, we have an opportunity to understand the true meaning of the Scriptures in a way that up to around 100 years ago was impossible; and today, Catholic Scripture scholars (who include the laity, women and minorities) are on the cutting-edge. With the aid of anthropology and other empirical sciences, knowledge of the Semitic languages, and so forth, we are able to understand the meaning of the Scriptures *in their context*.

For example: Scripture scholars today can clearly shed light on the troubling lines of today's letter of Paul to the Ephesians. In Paul's cultural context, he was making complete sense. Wives, at that time, in that culture were seen as the property of the husband who was their Lord and Master. In this context, most people thought that wives who always obeyed their husbands were fortunate and safer than those who challenged their Lord and Master. Paul was simply stating a cultural reality, *not* a religious *truth*.

Understanding this cultural reality, we can see that the teachings and actions of Jesus were totally liberating and radically counter-cultural: talking with women in public, inviting women into his inner circle: women being the first disciples to meet the resurrected Jesus; allowing Mary to anoint his feet; Mary Magdalene being the “Apostle to the Apostles;” all was pointing to a whole new way of being human and recognizing the dignity of each person. No wonder he was a threat to the power structure and was crucified.

A second example: today looking at the Creation Story in Genesis, we realize that the Bible isn’t a science textbook or even a history book, but a library of Books that shares humanity’s deepening understanding of God and God’s relations with humanity. The seven-day creation story does not tell us *how* the world was created, but rather *why*. God created the world and all creation and humanity in God’s image out of *love!* As Fr. Andy reminds us: there is no contradiction between science and faith - correct theology must be based on correct science.

Our Holy Father Benedict has invited the Church throughout the world to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Second Vatican Council by experiencing a “Year of Faith” - studying and reflecting, discerning and dialoguing on what it means to be a Catholic in the 21st Century. Our Parish Faith Enrichment Team is preparing a number of opportunities for us to do so here at All Saints. In our parish surveys, you indicated that Bible study was a top priority.

I am pleased to share that Dr. Mary MacDonald, our Parishioner and Professor of Religious Studies at Le Moyne, will offer an Introduction to the Bible to be held on three Wednesdays in September (the 12th, 19th, and 26th) both in the morning and in the evening for our convenience. Details will be forthcoming in our Bulletin and website. Following this “Introduction to the Bible” series, we will be forming “Bible Study Groups,” reflecting on a Book of the Bible at a time, to understand its context as an aid to our spiritual enrichment. This will be a wonderful opportunity for us.

I close this Homily with a story told by my good friend Anthony DiMello:

A learned man once came to Buddha and said, 'The things You teach, sir, are not to be found in the Holy Scriptures.'

'Then put them in the Scriptures,' said Buddha.

After an embarrassed pause the man went on to say, 'May I be so bold as to suggest, sir, that some of the things you teach actually contradict the Holy Scriptures?'

'Then amend the Scriptures,' Said Buddha.

"A proposal was made at the United Nations that all Scriptures of all religions of the world be revised. Anything in them that would lead to intolerance or cruelty or bigotry should be deleted. Anything that would in any way be against the dignity and welfare of man should be dropped.

"When it was found that the author of the proposal was Jesus Christ himself, reporters rushed to his residence to ask for further explanation. His explanation was simple and brief: 'The Scriptures, like the Sabbath, are for man,' he said, 'Not man for the Scriptures.'"

Amen!

