

THE BIBLE AS GUIDANCE AND ENCOURAGEMENT

As you know over the next three weeks we shall have some introductory sessions of Bible Study at All Saints and these will be followed by a study of Saint Mark's Gospel and then by study of other books of the Bible. Since it falls to my lot to lead the studies for the next three weeks, let me tell you what the topics will be for those three weeks. After that I'll comment on today's readings and encourage you to take on a systematic study of the books of the Bible from which they come.

In the first session next Wednesday we shall consider "What is the Bible?" The second week we'll ask "How was the Bible written?" and the third week we'll talk about choosing an edition of the Bible to use for study and reflection. The information about meeting place and meeting times is in the bulletin.

We have just heard three readings and a psalm from the Bible – a reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah, followed by a song of praise, a reading from a letter of the apostle James, and a reading from the Gospel of Mark. Four different genre or kinds of writing - prophecy, song, letter, and gospel. At Sunday Mass over a three year cycle we hear a lot of readings from the Bible and usually someone gives a homily to help us see how the readings can provide guidance and encouragement for our lives. However, we don't hear everything that is in the Bible. The pieces we do hear are sections of larger documents and are taken out of their original contexts. A selection of readings was made by liturgy experts to fit in with the themes of the liturgical year and to get us in touch with those themes. The practice of reading selected passages on given days or occasions probably began with the annual Jewish religious festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Sukkoth. Later on Judaism also made a roster of passages for Sabbath services. Within Christianity the use of prescribed readings can be traced back to the early church and no doubt it was inherited from Judaism. The early Christians used the same scriptures as the Jews – in fact, the very earliest Christians were Jews. They constituted a sect within Judaism. As they developed into a separate religious community, which welcomed non-Jews as members, they created additional religious writings and added them to the scriptures they read on Sundays and for festivals. So, today a Christian Bible has one section called the Old Testament which contains writings which come from Judaism and another section called the New Testament which contains writings that come from the early church. As we listen to Bible readings at Mass we receive some education in our faith and we can deepen and extend that faith by more systematic study.

The word "Bible" derives from the Greek word *biblia* which means books – books, plural. We might think of the Bible as one book but, in fact, it is more like a library than a single book. It contains writings of various kinds – law, prophecy, teaching, poetry, proverbs, gospels, and so on, with a variety of points of view. We should not be surprised that, on occasion, writers of different parts of the Bible disagree with each other. We, too, have differences in our understanding of God and what God asks of us. Let's look at the kinds of writing in the four passages to which we have just listened. All of today's scripture

readings speak about the faithfulness of God and the faith to which he calls us. Two of them also speak of healing as a sign of God's care.

The first reading is from the book of the prophet Isaiah. A prophet is someone who speaks for God, calling people back to a faithful relationship with God and with their brothers and sisters, challenging them to be attentive to the world around them. Sometimes the prophet, as in today's reading, offers encouragement to those trying to live faithfully. Other times he warns of retribution for those who are unfaithful and unjust. We get some of that, too, in today's reading. However, something else is going on in ch. 35 of Isaiah that we might miss unless we look at the whole structure of the book. The section from which today's short reading comes echoes the return of the Israelites from exile in Babylon, rejoicing in the beauty and abundance of the homeland, and in the goodness and faithfulness of the God who brings about their return. The return, the new life, the prophet suggests, will offer healing and refreshment for the community.

A song, a psalm, comes between the first and second readings. The word "psalm" denotes a song to the accompaniment of a harp, an instrument widely used in Middle Eastern cultures. The psalmist, or song-maker, praises God as the creator and savior who faithfully cares for his people. The book of Psalms is a collection of prayers, in the form of songs, which were used in divine worship in ancient Israel and today are used in the worship services and personal prayer of Jews and Christians. Within the Book of Psalms there are different kinds of songs – songs of lament, songs of praise, songs of thanksgiving, pilgrim songs, and so on – songs that echo the circumstances of our lives, songs that praise God and encourage us to live faithfully.

Within Mass the psalm is an interlude that leads us from the first to the second reading. Today's second reading, taken from the letter of James in the New Testament, continues the theme of faith that we saw in the first reading. In particular, it addresses the problem of discrimination based on social class. Letters are the earliest documents in the New Testament and they serve various purposes, inspiring Christians with hope, and, like the prophets, correcting them and calling them back when they stray. James, who is referred to in the gospels of Mark and Matthew as the brother of Jesus, became the leader of the church in Jerusalem and one of Christianity's first martyrs. Scholars suggest that the letter of James is probably the reworking, following James' death, of a sermon he had given. Someone turned his sermon into a circular letter and sent it to early Christian communities to pass on James's insistence that faith in God must bear fruit in good works.

The third reading for today comes from the Gospel of Mark. Gospels are a kind of writing found only in the early Christian community. Gospel, of course, means Good News. The gospels are accounts of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They are theological documents in which the writers tell us how they understand Jesus and his message. The gospels include segments of Jesus' teaching and accounts of his healing work such as the healing of the deaf man that we heard about in the reading from Mark's gospel. As Mark's gospel unfolds we see, through teaching and healing accounts, a progressive revelation of the nature of the kingdom of God. Later in the fall the parish will offer a study of Mark's Gospel which will enable participants to look at the whole gospel, to see how the author used materials available to him to tell us about Jesus, to see the plan he employs as he tells the Jesus story.

The study will combine attention to the sources and formation of the gospel with prayerful reflection on the messages it offers to us today.

As I think about Mark's Gospel I cannot help but remember a group of church leaders with whom I worked many years ago in Papua New Guinea. A Papua New Guinean colleague, Mark Kolandi, and I were conducting a six week course on counseling for pastors and catechists and sisters from all over the country. We started each day with Bible study and reflection, progressively working through passages from the Gospel of Mark. One day we read the story in ch. 9 about the man who brought to Jesus his son who was possessed by a spirit and was displaying behavior like that of a person in an epileptic fit. We talked together about what was going on in this story and one of the catechists in our group, a young married man named Peter, said to us, "This story is meant for me. A spirit has hold of me and is destroying my life. It is the spirit of tobacco." He went on to tell, not of the damage tobacco was doing to his physical health, but of the trouble it was causing in his marriage and family life. He was spending money on tobacco that really should have been used for food and necessities for the family. He was able to recognize that his wife and kids were suffering because of his addiction. Peter resolved to stop smoking and asked for the prayerful support of the course participants. By the time we all dispersed several weeks later he was tobacco free and when I saw him a year later in his home town of Madang he told me that giving up tobacco had transformed his life. I'm not here today to ask you to quit smoking, though that might not be a bad thing to do, but rather to ask you to take the opportunity, like Peter from Madang, to let the scriptures speak to your life.

In instituting Bible Study at All Saints the Faith Enrichment Team is providing an opportunity to learn more about how the scriptures came to be composed and how they have been used for guidance and encouragement by Jews and Christians. I hope I'll see some of you at the introductory sessions over the next three weeks. I'll stick around for a while after Mass in case you have any questions. Thank you.