

Year of the Bible Series
Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ (St Jerome)

The Pentateuch (The First Five Books of the Bible) – Continuation

Dear Holy People of God,

Last week, we saw examined the spiritual value of the books of Genesis and Exodus. As a reminder, Genesis is a book about the creation of the world, while Exodus is a book about the creation of Israel as a people. After the Fall of Adam and Eve, God desired to bring the world back to Himself, and the book of Exodus tells the story about the beginnings of this people as an entity, with the defining events being the revelation of the Sacred Name of God (Yahweh), the departure from Egypt through the Red Sea, and finally, the reception of the 10 Commandments (the first three Commandments are meant to tell us how we ought to live out our relationship with God; while the last seven are meant to teach us how to live with one another). Let us now proceed to the other three books that constitute the Pentateuch, that is, these first five books of the Bible.

The next in the series is the **book of Leviticus**. The name **Leviticus** stems from the Greek *leitikos*, which means “pertaining to the Levites,” that is, to the priests. Hence, the book of Leviticus is primarily concerned with regulations on Jewish priestly ministry, such as, the ordination of priests, the dressing of priests, (Leviticus 8-10), and how the priests were supposed to carry out the ritual sacrifices or offerings to Yahweh, which consisted of the following: The Burnt Offering; the Grain Offering; the Peace Offering; the Sin offering; and the Guilt Offering. Though Leviticus is very much a manual for the temple priests, it also had norms for lay people, such as how to cleanse themselves (the Cleanliness Code, found in chapters 11 - 15. It goes without saying that much of the prescriptions in Leviticus are not binding on us Christians under the New Covenant of Jesus Christ, as we read in the fifteenth chapter of the Acts of Apostles. In that Council of Jerusalem, the early Church decided for the primacy of faith in Christ Jesus as the essential norm, even if some Levitical prescriptions such as the abstention from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from strangled meat and from fornication were likewise upheld (Acts 15:22-29). That said, because of the difficulty in interpreting which laws from this book should be upheld today and which shouldn't, the book of Leviticus is one of the least read books in the Christian Lectionary.

The **book of Numbers**, less neglected than Leviticus, contains both a long list of laws and likewise narratives about Israel's unfaithfulness or rebellion against Yahweh. The English title of this book, that is, **Numbers**, is derived from the Greek *Arithmoi*, that is, numbers. (The English Arithmetic is from the same stem). The title Numbers is likely based on the two numberings of the first and second generations of the Israelites in the wilderness. We find these two censuses in chapters 1 and 26. The Hebrew title of this books is different from the Greek title upon which the English is based. The Hebrew title is *Bamidbar* which means, **in the Wilderness**, a term taken from the opening lines of the book: “The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai” (Numbers 1:1). While the book of Exodus begins with Israel living in Egypt, the book of Numbers begins with Israel in the desert or wilderness, specifically, at Mount Sinai (Numbers 1 – 10). Numbers describes Israel's journey through the desert till when they get to the plains of Moab. Central to this book are the covenants between Israel and Yahweh. Also, of significance is Israel's constant grumblings against Moses and Yahweh. There persisted the lingering temptation to want to return

to Egypt. If Leviticus gives us codes of behavior, Numbers gives us what might be described as constitutional amendments, detailing the historical circumstances that marked the covenants between Israel and Yahweh. Numbers also recounts Moses' sin (20 -21), which prevented him from entering the Promised Land: Moses struck the rock twice when he was asked by God to speak to the rock! (I have often been puzzled about the exact nature of this sin of Moses, and the punishment by Yahweh). A popular text from Numbers is the priestly blessing of Aaron (Numbers 6:22-27 – Kindly reread it. It is always the First Reading of the Mass on January 1, Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God). What is the value of the book of Numbers for us today? Summarily, Numbers tells us that the journey through the desert was not a smooth experience for Israel. Numbers narrate ten rebellions against God by Israel. It appears the whole experiment of leaving Egypt was a disaster! Does that sound familiar? How often do we feel that our lives are not in shape? How often do we feel that our relationship with God is not going well, that abandoning the faith is the easier thing to do? How often do we find the Christian life difficult to live? Numbers gives us a perspective: when we feel like things are not going well with our spiritual lives, do not focus on yourself. Focus on God and God's promises. This is what keeps Israel going in the wilderness: in spite of their rebellions, there is hope for Israel because of God's promises to Israel in the covenants. And just as God kept his promises of old, so does God do today. Take it easy, God has not abandoned you – that is the message of the book of Numbers.

(To be continued – Fr Maurice).