

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

June 4, 2017

Spiritual Ponderings

Sacred Scripture

Saint Jerome wrote “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.” It is therefore important for Catholics from time to time to refresh and expand their knowledge of Scripture. I hope that this month’s reflections will help you grow in your knowledge of Scripture.

One day little Joey was asked by his mother what he had learned in Sunday school. “Well, Mom, our teacher told us how God sent Moses behind enemy lines on a rescue mission to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. When he got the Red Sea, he had his army build a pontoon bridge and all the people walked across the bridge to safety. Finally he radioed headquarters for reinforcements. They sent bombers to blow up the bridge and trap all the Egyptians on the other side so that the Israelites were all safe.”

“Now, Joey, is this really what your teacher taught you?” his mother asked.

“We, no, Mom, but if I told you what the teacher told us you would never believe it!” Joe answered.

The preceding story/joke hints at one of the problems that our world has today with Sacred Scripture. Most of people no longer read the stories of the Scripture within a sense of awe and wonder because we have heard the stories so many times before. The phrase “familiarity breathes contempt” certainly applies to many people’s experience of Scripture. It is not that we don’t like Scripture but rather we do not treat it with the respect it deserves. We are not letting it penetrate into the core of our being so that it can shape us. Our lack of awe when it comes to the Bible has led many people into totally misunderstanding the Bible and the Church’s teaching on Sacred Scripture. The following are ten guidelines that help me understand Sacred Scripture better.

1. Word of God

We Catholics believe that Bible is truly the Word of God but God did not dictate the Bible word for word to the Biblical authors. We believe God inspired the Biblical authors within the context of their day. For example God did not whisper into the ear of the author of Genesis how exactly created the world in seven days. Instead we believe the author inspired by God to write about how God brings order out of Chaos used the idea of God creating the world in seven days to teach us that world was not an accident but was deliberately planned by God. It is in this way that we believe God inspired the Biblical writers.

This inspires me to even greater amazement that God could painstakingly inspire each author through his or her cultural experiences to write about Him in the way that He wanted. It would have been easier for Him to just divinely dictate to someone. God though does take short cuts. He is an expert craftsman.

The Bible is yet another way God communicates with us that both protects our free will and requires a little bit of faith on our part.

2. Sacred Scripture and Tradition

Someone texted me the other day a yes or no question and I responded by typing “y” for yes. I was caught off guard a few moments later when I received another text explaining why the person had asked the first question. I quickly realized that he had mistaken the “y” I used to symbolize for my yes for “y” that might symbolize the question why. This was once again another reminder of how important context is when communicating with others.

God in His wisdom gave us not only the Bible but also a key from which to make sure that we are interpreting the Bible in the correct way. This key, we call Tradition with a capital “T”. Tradition helps us interpret the Scriptures in the way that God intended us to.

Many Protestant faiths declare that we should only follow Scripture the problem with that is twofold. The first is nowhere is Scripture does it say that Scripture alone should be used and secondly Scripture can be interpreted differently if we do not have a common frame of reference. For example Jesus tells his followers one moment that they must “Hate their father and mother...” If we do not have tradition we run the risk of interpreting this in a very literal sense.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

June 11, 2017

Spiritual Ponderings

Sacred Scripture

St. Augustine wrote the following about Sacred Scripture: “If you believe what you like in the gospels, and reject what you don’t like, it is not the gospel you believe, but yourself”

3. Bible is actually a Library of Books

When I was growing up Buffy the Vampire Slayer was a really big phenomenon. The show focused on a young girl who was chosen to be the “Slayer” (a super hero with a special talent for killing vampires). The vampires in the stories were horrible blood sucking soulless demons than when exposed to sunlight would turn to ashes. Fast forward about twenty years a series of books and movies came out called “Twilight.” These books were about a young girl who fell in love with a vampire. The author of the “Twilight” series changed two important characteristics about vampires in her book. She made a group of them good (which is impossible because they are traditionally soulless) and she declared that vampires sparkled when they encountered sunlight instead of bursting into flames.

I soon discover that when I was talking to people about vampires, that I could no longer assume that they meant the same thing I did when I used the word “vampire.” Context became very important.

In much the same way, we Catholics feel that context is the key when understanding the Bible. The Bible is in many ways not one book but seventy-three books and these books are not at all from the same genre. Some of the books are historical and others are law book. The book of Psalm is a Jewish hymnal and many of the New Testament writings are letters meant to be read out loud in community. Any one of the books of the Bible may be made up of more than one style of literature. For example, we do not read the passion accounts within the Gospel the same way we read a parable from the Gospel.

The Bible is in many ways more complicated and dynamic that we will ever know or be able to grasp and this is another reason why we should have a sense of awe when we approach it.

4. Translation

At the end of my sophomore year, I was told by my high school French teacher that I spoke French like a Spanish speaking cow and that she would give me a “C” for French II if I agreed not to take French III my junior year. I quickly agreed and that pretty much ended my foreign language studies. Most of you reading this book are probably like me and read your Bible in English. This is fine but we must remember that doing this means we are reading from a translation. The original writing of the book in the Bible that you are reading from probably was Greek or Hebrew. This is important because sometimes there are words that do not translate neatly from one language to another. For example I have been told over and over again in my studies that the word we read as “repent” in our English Bibles comes from the Greek Word “Metanoia” which would more accurately mean “to put on a new mind or change one’s way of thinking. This is why reading the footnotes in one’s Bible and commentaries about the Sacred Scriptures can do a lot to enhance a person’s understanding of the Word of God.

5. Reader Response

Another important thing to remember about the Bible is that the human authors had a particular audience in mind when they wrote their book of the Bible. Knowing this can help us gain more information behind the symbolism used in

the stories. For example the story of the Good Samaritan becomes all the more shocking when you realize just how hated Samaritans were by the Jewish people of Christ time. The author hints at this by concluding his story with the God-fearing Jew who followed the Commandments refusing even to use the word Samaritan (Luke XX). The fact that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey has deeper meaning when you learn that a Jewish King only rode a donkey during a time of peace. Otherwise He would have ridden in on his war horse. God literally was coming to his people in peace and what did we do to Him? If nothing else try imagine what it was like to be a first century Jew or Gentile hearing these stories for the first time. You will see that Jesus was a very controversial person and He was definitely anything but boring.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

June 18, 2017

Spiritual Ponderings

Sacred Scripture

St. Gregory the Great wrote the following about the Bible: "The Bible is a letter from Almighty God to His creatures."

6. Typology

Catholics believe the Old Testament is fulfilled in the present and the New Testament is prefigured in the Old Testament. We believe that the Old Testament helps us unlock the meaning of the New Testament (and vice versa). The story of Jacob's son Joseph in the Old Testament in many ways mirror's the story of Jesus in the New Testament. For example Joseph was for all purposes dead as he sat in the bottom of the well that his brothers threw him in. Jesus was thrown into a tomb and assumed dead for three days. Joseph was given over to slavery and Jesus was given over to sin. Both were raised, Joseph to Pharaoh's right hand and Jesus to the Father's right hand. Both suffered what they suffered because God the Father allowed it and both were able to save lives because of their experience.

When we refer to Jesus as the Lamb of God we should go back and read the Exodus and the history of the Passover lambs. Referring to Jesus as the new law giver, invites us to learn more about Moses in order to better understand what the author meant by that. In order to understand Jesus' "I am" statement we need to go back and study the first "I am" statement in the Bible in Exodus where God is speaking to Moses through the burning bush.

7. Separate Theory from Dogma

Most Scripture scholars believe that Mark was the first Gospel written because it is the shortest. Matthew and Luke soon followed Mark in writing their Gospel often quoting Mark and unnamed source that scholars call "Q" according to this theory and finally the Gospel of John was written. Recently I read a new theory that stated that Mark was the last of the Gospels to be written because it was an edited and shortened version of the others that was designed to be chanted during the Easter Vigil. This is a scholarly debate that in the end does not matter. What matters is the dogma's that we gain from the Sacred Scripture for example that Jesus Christ is true God and true man is nonnegotiable. Which Gospel came first can be argued all we want. While it is interesting to theorize don't let yourself get to caught up in that you miss what God is trying to say to us in the passage.

8. Get to Know More than the Sunday Readings

If I were to say to you: "Hello! My name is Inigo Montoya! You killed my father! Prepare to die!" or "Inconceivable! - You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means," or "As you wish." You might look at me like I was an idiot unless you had seen the movie the Princess Bride. If on the other hand you had seen the movie, the words that I just spoke would invoke in you images of pirates, sword fights, giants, six fingered men, a cowardly prince and a beautiful princess. Knowing the whole story helps us understand the parts that make it up.

The Catholic Church has created three sets readings to be read at Sunday Mass. They then with great imagination named them Year A, Year B, and Year C. At the same time they created two sets of readings for weekday Masses and named them Year I and Year II. If one were to read all the Scripture Readings at Mass, you would have read most of the Bible

but not all. The other problem would be the stories in the Bible are sliced up in a way that sometimes prevents us from seeing how they all connect to the bigger picture.

For example in (MNNN) Gospel Jesus and his disciples encounter a man possessed by a group of demons who call themselves Legion. Jesus drives the demons out of the man and into a herd of swine and the swine all go up a hill and commit suicide by jumping into the lake below. The people of the town come and ask Jesus to leave. The man who was once possessed by Jesus is told by Jesus to go home and help his family. Later Jesus returns to the same area and instead of driving him away they welcome him this time. We are left to assume it is because of the testimony of the man who had once been possessed. If you are not careful you can miss this detail because ((((((does not draw much at

If you want to understand the Scriptures better take the time to take a Bible Class or pick up a book on the Sacred Scriptures.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

June 27, 2017

Spiritual Ponderings

Sacred Scripture

Here is another quote from St. Gregory about Sacred Scripture:

The Holy Bible is like a mirror before our mind's eye. In it we see our inner face. From the Scriptures we can learn our spiritual deformities and beauties. And there too we discover the progress we are making and how far we are from perfection.

9. Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth

The world Bible can form an interesting acronym Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth in the English Language and this can be a helpful reminder for us that the Bible is suppose to invoke in us a response a change of attitude. If we read the Bible and do not find it calling us to change a part or life for the better then we need to reread the passage again.

This probably nowhere more evident to us then in the Sermon on the Mount and the giving of the Beatitudes in Matthew's Gospel (Matthew 5) Jesus sets out a series of eight statements redefining what it means to be blest or to be successful and these eight statements go against what the world tells us will lead to happiness.

10. Even the Devil Can Quote Scripture

Finally when we read the Sacred Scripture it is important to once again do so in the context of the faith community the Church. We see in the Gospel stories where Jesus is tempted in the desert by the devil himself that even the devil can try to use Scripture for his own evil purpose. Therefore, Sacred Scripture needs to be read and pondered under the light of Tradition.

The following are a list of sayings that someone gave me that concern Sacred Scripture.

1. A Bible in the hand is worth two in the bookcase.
2. Men do not reject the Bible because it contradicts itself, but because it contradicts them.
3. The Bible was given to us to tell us how we can get to heaven, not to tell us how the heavens work.
4. "Most people are troubled by those passages of Scripture which they cannot understand; but as for me, I have always noticed that the passages in Scripture which trouble me most are those which I do understand." - Mark Twain
5. "The Devil is not afraid of the Bible that has dust on it"
6. "The new Testament is the very best book that ever was or will be known in the world." - Charles Dickens
7. "Within the covers of the Bible are the answers for all the problems men face." — Ronald Reagan
8. "If you believe what you like in the Gospel, and reject what you don't like, it is not the Gospel you believe, but yourself." — Augustine of Hippo
9. "A Bible that's falling apart usually belongs to someone who isn't." - Charles H. Spurgeon

10. "We were given the Scriptures to humble us into realizing that God is right, and the rest of us are just guessing."
— Rich Mullins

Finally, I would like to conclude this reflection with the following prayer that someone gave me:

Our Father, who art in heaven, sacred is Your Word, Your kingdom come, Your Words be heard on earth as they are in heaven. Give us today Your Sacred Word. Forgive our neglect of it in the past as we forgive those who neglect us. Lead us toward an encounter with You each time we delve into the Scriptures. For Your presence, Your power, and Your glory are ever present among us now and forever. Amen.