

Sermon Lent 5 Year C 2022

The gospel portion placed before us today for this fifth Sunday in Lent is one of the most striking in the gospel record. One of the most striking and certainly one of the most confronting. What makes it so powerful and impressive is what is at stake in the story: a woman's *very life* hangs in the balance. This is a moment of high tension. The story of course continues a major thread put to us in the reading these past few weeks about mercy and forgiveness. But we also hear it in this late stage of Lent because of course Jesus – the truly innocent one – *will not* walk away unscathed. He is the one who will bear our iniquities who will carry our griefs, and who will ultimately succumb to the blood lust of the angry mobs. And this story is unique in the gospels. It doesn't occur anywhere else. It is unique even in John, where we encounter it. It is quite unlike all the other stories found in this gospel. Clearly, the evangelist had access to a tradition, some source, which keep alive this incident. The evangelist recognizing it was too important a story, too important an incident from the life of Our Lord, to miss.

We would do well to frequently return to this story, to keep on drawing from its richness; to allow its tension and drama to confront us, the conviction to speak to us, and the tenderness, gratitude and mercy to comfort us. This is surely why Christians continue to read the bible. It is not just a collection of historical documents. It does not simply give us insight into how man in millennia past thought and behaved. It is not just the record of great and holy men and women. It continues to speak to us. Through it, *Christ* continues to speak to us.

In this fifth and now final installment looking at some of the key traditional Christian disciplines, we come now to the core practice of private, devotional reading of the bible. We have covered a fair bit of ground these past few weeks as we have looked at prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and sacramental confession, and I do hope you have found it at least a little bit helpful, taking a deep dive into what really are key markers of our Christian identity and what ought to be key markers of our personal Christian life.

In looking at the discipline of personal, devotional reading of the bible we are in fact taken back to the gospel reading for the first Sunday of Lent, and Jesus's encounter with the devil in the wilderness. In the account we heard then from Luke, Our Lord says *three times* in response to the devil's temptations, '*Scripture says...*' It is a deep, familiar knowledge of the sacred scripture that enables Our Lord to combat the devil.

During the Covid lockdowns, a couple of our parishioners said to me, *Father, I am reading the whole bible!* What a marvelous and fruitful way to have used that time in *our wilderness!* I really think that every Christian should, at some point in their life, and at least once, just make that hard slog of reading through the entire bible. But we do not read the bible, 'just to get through it'. It is one of the limitations of the usual Anglican approach to scripture, namely through the lectionaries for morning and evening prayer. In this, two great chunks of scripture in the morning, and another two great chunks in the evening, so to 'get through' all the bible in a year. And these joined with a daily chunk of psalmody as well, so to 'get through' all the psalms in a month. This certainly helps in our familiarity with the bible. The trouble is, it can lead to either a surface reading, and to what we might call spiritual indigestion! Such a heavy diet is kind of like having steak, red wine and chocolate cake every night for dinner, and in fact breakfast as well! Familiarity with the bible is necessary. We need to know the stories. We need to know how the themes, and how the characters fit. But we do not read the bible just for familiarity, or just to get through it. We read the bible precisely so we can *encounter Christ*.

Saint Jerome, writing in Palestine in the fourth to early fifth centuries, brings it home when he says quite simply, *ignorance of the scriptures is ignorance of Christ*. There is in Jerome's dictum a sense of urgency and a sense that this is for everyone. Not just the specialized. Not just the qualified. Not just the professionally religious. As Christians, as followers of Jesus, and disciples of the Lord, we want to know him! And if we don't - if we can't be bothered, if we think it's all too hard - well then, just what are we playing at? If our laziness, our bad habits, our addiction to comfort and leisure, our indifference, is what determines our priorities, well, just what are we playing at? And we say our work and our busyness simply prevent us, well, *what greater work* is there for the Christian than to know Christ? We live at a time and in a place when literacy is near universal and when access to bibles has never been easier or cheaper. In fact, it costs us nothing. It is all just a click away on your nearest screen. God has put us in this time and this place. In other words, there is no excuse! There is no excuse for not knowing and encountering Christ. There is no excuse for ignorance of him.

Now, there are a few things we could do immediately to begin implementing a regular and sustainable pattern of bible reading, so that we can get to know Christ better, so we can hear him speak to us through its pages, to our hearts and lives. One of the things

we can do is to prepare for Sunday mass by just reading the scripture portions set for each week. You do not have to guess what they will be. You do not have to go looking in any complicated place. Each week, at the back of the pew sheet, the readings for the following Sunday are listed there for you already! So, Saturday afternoon or Saturday night each week, take out your pew sheet from the week before. When you get home today put your pews sheet into your bible, so that it is there when you come to make your preparations. This will do two things. One, you will get more out of your worship on Sunday mornings. There will already be a familiarity with the text. You will be expecting them. You will have already placed yourself in the readings. It means when they appear in the context of worship you can be brought to a deeper place.

The second thing your preparation will do is that it will make the sermon more personal. Our sermons – while not typically extensive exegetical expositions - are mostly anchored in the readings some way. So, when the readings are referenced, again, you have already been there. What is said in the pulpit will more deeply and immediately connect with what you have already been sitting with in the text. So, keep your pews sheets, and at some point on Saturday go through the three readings. It doesn't take long. And sit with them in quiet prayer. Don't necessarily interrogate them or seek connections or meaning. Just sit with them. Become familiar with them.

There is also a place within Christian devotional life for what we might call 'bible study' and it is my hope that over the next little while we will expand our offerings of that in this parish. Many churches from various traditions engage in this practice. It certainly has merit. It is certainly useful. But it can leave us, however, with the idea that the bible is a special text, something that can only be accessed if interrogated, either in a group or by the careful guidance of a so-called expert, and this can leave the bible at arm's length. Yes, the bible can be studied, indeed should be studied. There are things that do need to be unpacked, that do need careful interpretation. But the bible is also the place of living encounter with the Lord Christ. It can become a living word *for you*. I think for the average faithful believer at home, just starting out reading through the gospels, in small portions is the best way to start. This can be either self-directed. Most bibles have headings within a chapter, and these are helpful. Or reading the gospel set for daily mass. Finding out what these are is easy to find online. Whichever way, read the text slowly, and then again. Let its words sink deep into your heart. Chew over a particular word or phrase that resonates with you. Bring that to God in prayer.

There is no time like the present! My invitation to you is that before the day is out, revisit the marvelous gospel holy church has seen fit to place before us today. We make it easy for you here. You do not even have to take a bible off the shelf and dust it off! It's all in your pew sheet. But carve a small piece of time this afternoon or this evening. Close the door to your room in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you... Read again the text. Let not only your *eye* rest on each word, but let your *heart* rest on each word. And in prayerful contemplation place yourself in that story. This is not about reading for interpretation. Not trying to get a hidden meaning out of the text. Not trying to 'get through it'. This about *praying* the bible, letting the bible speak to you, and about encountering there the Lord Christ. Amen.