

Last Sunday after Pentecost: Christ the King
November 22, 2020

Sunday Said Mass at the High Altar
by the Reverend James Ross Smith

Ezekiel 34:11–17; Psalm 95:1–7; 1 Corinthians 15:20–28; Matthew 25:31–46

In the Episcopal Church, those who are to be ordained must “solemnly declare that [they] . . . believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation.” They go on “solemnly [to] engage to conform to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church.” The ordinand is required to sign this Declaration “in the sight of all present” before the ordination can proceed.¹

This is a solemn moment, one of those moments—and there are moments like it in baptismal liturgy—that make one realize that the candidate is being ordained for a ministry in the church of God, the *ekklesia*, a people called, the Body of Christ; which is to say that the essential actor in any ordination is not the ordinand, but God, who speaks, calls, reveals, and saves; God, the only one who deserves our worship; God in Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the One on

¹ See, for example, Book of Common Prayer, p. 526.

whom all our doctrine is founded and from whom all our teaching flows.

I have known priests, who have chafed at the words “all things necessary to salvation.” They find them too Protestant, tending towards a biblical literalism that they cannot affirm.

Though I understand that concern, I don’t share it. I grew up in a tradition, and at a time, when the Bible was talked about more than it was read, especially by lay people. I did not become an Episcopalian just to read the Bible, but it was a joy to discover that I’d found a church where reading and interpreting the Bible were regarded as acts of fidelity and devotion.

But, I have also come to believe that to declare that the Holy Scriptures [are] the Word of God and contain all that is needed to be saved is to say much, much more than one can ever say in a single sentence, even if one must affirm that sentence in writing.

To say those words is to acknowledge that one is committed to a life of interpretation. One can certainly say “all things necessary to salvation” and mean it, but it takes a lifetime to discover what you meant when you said it.

I recently heard a young rabbi talk about “deep Torah.” For Jews, Torah refers first and foremost to the first five books of the Bible. But it is more than that. It includes a body of teaching and *interpretation* that, some Jews believe, began with Moses and was continued by generations of teachers over hundreds of years; and those interpretations are presented not so much as doctrines or dogmas but as the discussions, arguments, and opinions of all those ancient sages. This means that to study means not just to memorize and repeat. It means joining a conversation which never ends. For Jews, the Word of God demands interpretation, and this act of interpreting is a kind of prayer or worship. To study is to hope to encounter God in God’s Word, to gain more understanding, to learn something essential about the God who, paradoxically, eludes all our interpretations.

And so, when I heard the phrase “deep Torah,” it seemed to me that this young rabbi was talking about delving into of Scripture with all its richness and complexity, but also about exploring the Bible’s deepest, most essential meanings.

The desire to distill the meaning of Scripture into something essential is an ancient one. Jesus himself does it in the gospels—love God, love neighbor—and

this is something that other rabbis did as well.² This need to summarize, to discover Scripture’s essential meaning, means that certain verses jump out at us when we hear them. They seem deeply true, directed right then and there to both mind and heart. As the Letter to the Hebrews says, “Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” (4:12). The lives of some of the church’s greatest saints—Antony, Francis, Ignatius of Loyola—were shaped by God’s word in just this way. They heard a verse of Scripture, their hearts were pierced, and they responded. Hearing meant doing, and nothing in their lives was the same after that.³

I suspect that many of us have verses of the Bible that are special in that way. For me, the words which we

² Rabbi Hillel the Elder (110 BCE–10 BCE) is remembered as saying, “That which is hateful to you, do not unto another: This is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary — [and now] go study.”

³ I am not arguing here for a process of harmonization or homogenization or trying to assert that “the Bible” has a single, essential meaning. That is an old and discredited interpretive move. What I am saying is that over and over again we see Christians and Jews raising up certain books, passages, or verses and privileging them in some way. Some American Protestants read much of the Bible through the lens of the Revelation to John. Liberation theologians tend to focus on the prophets and, especially, the gospels. Some medieval Western monks regarded the Song of Songs as essential to their understanding of the monastic life and their relationship with God. Many Jewish interpreters regard Exodus as more central than Genesis, something that many Christians tend not to do. Many more examples could be given. None of these interpreters stopped reading the rest of the Bible. Certain passages simply seemed to say something true and essential to them. These passages helped those readers to read the rest of the Bible.

just heard in our second reading from 1 Corinthians 15—“The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (15:26)—were like that, when I first studied them in seminary. For me, Paul’s honesty about death helped me to accept that redemption has happened and yet death still occurs. We live in a world where Jesus Christ is King and Lord, but it is a world in which the work of redemption is incomplete. We have been baptized into Christ’s resurrection, but sickness and death have not gone away, not yet. We live in a world in which “the powers and principalities” have not been fully conquered. Human beings resist God and are tempted to worship those things that bring death, not life. The fifteenth chapter of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians is “deep Scripture” for me. It helps me to see that the world in which poverty, violence, hunger, and greed are ubiquitous is the same world that is “charged with the grandeur of God,” in the words of the poet⁴. It helps me to understand what Dr. King meant when he said, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”⁵

Today’s gospel passage, which gives us Jesus’ final teaching before the account of his passion and death, is also “deep Scripture.” It has been read as an essential distillation of Jesus’ teaching for centuries. Saint John

⁴ Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J., “God’s Grandeur”

⁵ Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution.” Speech given at the National Cathedral, March 31, 1968.

Chrysostom, who lived in the fourth century, quoted this passage nearly 200 times in his sermons, many of which dealt at length on the issue of wealth and poverty.⁶ In the twentieth century, the Sermon on the Mount and *this* passage, Matthew 25, helped transform the life of Dorothy Day, one of the founders of the Catholic Worker movement. It has been said that when she read Matthew 25 there was no “as if.” It wasn’t just a metaphor. When she cared for those in need, she met Christ and Christ met her.⁷

For me, today’s gospel passage is essential because I cannot ignore it, though I sometimes wish I could. I am both judged and sustained by it. Like 1 Corinthians 15, it describes the world as it is, not as I would like it to be. Poverty and its effects are visible and all around us. We see it on the streets of New York. We see it in our neighbors in need each week at our drop-by events. Jesus words today remind me that I am *in* those words not above them or outside of them. There is no magic wand that will make poverty, suffering, or death simply go away. As a citizen, I must support those policies that will improve the lives of all the citizens of the world. But Jesus asks of us something more direct than that as well: he tells us today that it is through practical acts of

⁶ See Luz, Ulrich, *Matthew 21-28*, Hermeneia Series, Augsburg Fortress Press, 272

⁷ <https://angelusnews.com/faith/dorothy-day-a-saint-for-our-age/>. Accessed Saturday, November 21, 2020.

compassion, kindness, service, and love that we discover what God's Kingdom really is. It is through all those cups of water, Band-Aids, visits, kind words, bagged lunches, blankets, and thermal underwear that we meet God and God meets us. And when that happens we discover that, though those acts of kindness cannot buy our way into heaven, they can bring us closer to a deep and essential truth: the One we call King and Lord came among us as one who serves, as One, who though we cannot always see it, will not let suffering, sin, or death have the last word, as One who has the power to wipe away every tear, even as he works to bring all things within the joyful embrace of God's most gracious will.

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