

## On stories and texts

Last week, I was at a wedding and, as I waited for a car to take me home, I got talking to two of the wedding guests from overseas. They told me how they had enjoyed the wedding ceremony and the conversation then turned from the ceremony to the Scriptures. As we talked, I became aware that one of them was rather wary of the Bible and as he talked further, I realised that he thought that we Christians regarded the Scriptures as a Sacred Text – that is: as a message from God that has to be obeyed under all circumstances. He seemed rather surprised when I agreed with him that that was a dangerous way of understanding the Scriptures, so I went on to explain to him that the Scriptures should be regarded fundamentally as story and not text. This should be obvious to anyone who has read anything of the Bible, because the contradictions between the various injunctions found there are striking – for example: "an eye for an eye" and "turn the other cheek". Unfortunately, many of us abuse the Bible, picking and choosing texts for our own purposes and we forget - or do not know - that all the Christian Churches hold that it is the whole Bible, which is the Word of God, which means that each passage has to be balanced with all other teachings and we may not take one passage and use it out of context. However, sadly many of us do just that. Hence, I believe, the look of wariness on the face of my friend at the wedding.

If, on the other hand, we understand the Bible as basically story, we realise that some things need to be done at one time of our life, but not at another and that some things are important at one time in history, but not in another. In other words, in seeking to understand the inspiration for each of us in the pages of the Bible, we need also to understand ourselves and the signs of the times in which we live. As Thomas Aquinas said, "God speaks to us through two great books – the Scriptures and the book of creation.

I spoke about the above conversation, when I said Mass in the prison last Tuesday. I spoke of it because there is another aspect of the Bible as story that we all, and especially that congregation, need to hear.

Each of us is writing a story, the story of our lives, which is also the story of our journey with God. This story does not begin only after we have recognised and accepted that there is a God, for although we may not have chosen to walk with God, nevertheless, he has chosen to walk with us. The story of each of us is unique and unrepeatable, but when we read those stories in the Bible with our heart and not just our head, we should be able to hear echoes of our own story there, for the God who walked with them is the same God who walks with us – and so these stories can help us better understand our own journey and our God. However, there is something even more important about those stories: Abraham, Moses, David etc were not great men whom God chose to work with him, they were great men because God chose to work with them. It is the presence of God which made them great and the more we appreciate that, the more we will appreciate that the presence of God will do the same for us. St Paul says, "The whole of creation eagerly awaits the revealing of the sons of God". That refers to us. This is not just doctrine, it is also promise and we need that promise.

Before the Reformation, most people understood the Bible as story. The walls of the churches were painted with scenes from the stories – they knew the stories. They also knew, that when they saw the Bible being carried through the church, accompanied by candles and incense, and when they saw all the people stand and sing alleluia as it passed, they knew that they were honouring those great men and women of the Scriptures whom the presence of God had made great and that in honouring them, they honoured God. But they also knew something even more than that. Those, who watched, also knew, that no matter how they themselves were despised by others or counted of little worth; no matter even how they despised themselves, nevertheless their lives were also the story of their journey with that same God, whose presence glorified the men and women of the Bible. They knew, therefore, that that same God would also bring them to glory – no matter what other people thought; the procession of the Book of Stories promised that.

When I finished speaking, at Mass, the prisoners began to applaud. I just hope that one day, my friend at the wedding will also one day hear the story and applaud.

## Diary

At the Parish Church where I say Mass on Sundays, there is an adoration room, where the Blessed Sacrament is exposed for private prayer. I go and spend an hour there a couple of times a week and it is very peaceful. However, to my surprise, I have discovered that this adoration goes on 24 hours a day and that day and night there is always at least one person from the parish in that room praying. I also notice that the majority of the people praying there are young people and from my observation they do so with obvious devotion. The thought occurs to me that maybe they should be preaching to me rather than the other way round – but then maybe they do!

I was invited to the birthday part of the Parish Priest, last Sunday after evening Mass. It was held in a Japanese restaurant and was a very pleasant evening. In the course of the evening, the Parish Priest told me about a seminary on the island of Flores, Indonesia, which was the largest training college for priests in the world. It has seven hundred seminarians – and on the neighbouring island there is another with three hundred seminarians. Wow!

God bless,

Terry