

## 4 Lent, Year A: 3 April 2011

We are a bare two weeks away from Holy Week,  
that period of the liturgical calendar we devote to following Jesus  
from the wild acclamations of the crowd on Palm Sunday  
as he triumphantly sweeps into Jerusalem  
to the desperate mourning of a few heart-sick onlookers on Good Friday  
as he dies a criminal's brutal death on a cross.

Of course the story does not end there,  
and so we will celebrate God's might act of resurrection love  
in the feasts of the Easter Vigil and Easter Day  
and then for 50 days we will rejoice in the good news of our deliverance.

Those who attend the whole arc of these observances  
will hear quite a lot of Scripture during that time:  
much from the Hebrew prophets and psalmists that the early Church appropriated  
as seeming to them to point to the story of Jesus;  
the testimony of that same early Church in letters passed between communities;  
and the stunning, seemingly first-hand observation of those last days  
preserved each in their own way by the four evangelists.

It's a lot to take in.  
Too often, most of us don't.  
By which I mean we let it wash over us, we treat it as spiritual comfort food:  
all the familiar stories, the familiar prayers, the familiar words.  
Rarely do we question what we hear, rarely examine our own beliefs,  
rarely face where we might legitimately disagree with the going interpretation.  
That's certainly okay; it's one way to go, one way to be.  
But you know me enough to understand that I question whether it is a living way.

So what would I recommend as an approach?  
Well, remember that survey course of English literature  
most of us took back in high school or college?  
If your experience was anything like mine,  
you probably used a textbook that was, in essence, a collection or anthology  
of literary classics representing the wisdom of many centuries.  
As I recall, ours covered Beowulf to T.S. Eliot.  
It was a potent witness to the power of the word to transform individuals  
and the societies they lived in.  
And it transformed me as well, and countless other students.  
To this day I retain tags of Chaucer ("Whan that Aprill with his shores soote the drogte  
of March hath perced to the roote") and Eliot ("Let us go then, you and I, when the  
evening is spread out across the sky like a patient etherized upon a table")  
and a deep affinity for the great body of language and culture  
that spans the centuries between them.

*This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing.  
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And as much appreciation as I have for the classics of other languages and cultures, this is the one that has shaped me, that remains living for me in a way no other can.

This is a good way to approach Scripture:

it too is first and foremost an anthology of literature—  
after all the word Bible comes from the Greek, *ta biblia*,  
which is plural and means the books, not the book.

So the very name points out that within the single cover there is diversity  
and perhaps even difference between the writings in it. (Hold that thought.)

But this collection of ancient works is also—for those who believe—  
a collection of living works.

Remember that we meet Scripture as God's people;  
we come to it, we attend to it with ears expecting to hear God, through the Spirit,  
speaking to us here and now.

Although originally written in Hebrew and Greek,  
this collection is for Christians our mother tongue—a “language,” a cultural heritage,  
one we share with our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters, by the way.

Far from being a dead language, or a mere historical relic,  
Scripture is a living message, and it has a profound capacity to change us still today.  
Contact with it shapes us, and it remains living for us  
in a way that no other body of sacred literature can.

Yet as with that collection of English classics,  
we must come to this body of work as active participants,  
seeking to understand the social context, the motivation,  
the historical placement and the agenda of the various writers.

Putting it another way, to get the most out of Scripture we must interpret what we read.

According to Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann,  
the task of interpretation is to

“transpose ancient voices into contemporary voices of authority,”

and to recognize the power of the Word

to generate transformation in our own world and society.

Consider today's selection of readings: first we get a highly colored piece of “history,”  
part of a collection of loosely related folktales gathered together over time

and finally roughly edited to create the saga of David;

then we have a song of faith, of confident trust in God's promise of deliverance,  
at once simple and profound;

next comes a snippet of a sermon, in which an unknown elder

reminds the early Church about the ethical implications of life as the Body of Christ;

and finally we have a story about Jesus from the fourth gospel,

a document with a very community-specific agenda

and written in such highly symbolic in-speak that one respected commentator says

“[W]e may not even be sure it would be properly understood by 1<sup>st</sup>-Century outsiders.”

How do we interpret all of this?

How do we take in such a variety of literary genres, written across a millennium,

in a way that will transpose these ancient voices into contemporary voices of authority?

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To a great extent we rely upon the preacher to do this.  
We assume that she or he has wrestled with the text and with scholarly commentary and with personal reflection in the light of our current world and society.  
And we hope that we will hear a message that will access the power of the Word to generate transformation, in us and in our world through us.  
(I make no claims for my own skill, by the way;  
I only speak of what a sermon *can* and perhaps should do.)

Ultimately, regardless of the skill of the preacher as orator or interpreter, the task of appropriation lies with us, and the Holy Spirit working in us, giving us ears to hear the Good News of God or, to use the metaphor in today's gospel, eyes to see.  
Because we bring our whole selves to worship, we may be grasped by different aspects of the readings than those presented in the sermon.  
We may be so absorbed in our own responses that we don't even *hear* the sermon. Such is the power of the Word indeed, working its will authentically in each of us.  
To be sure, there are also times when the Word doesn't reach us at all: we may be distracted by the life circumstances that have accompanied us into church, or by the heat or the cold or our child in the pew next to us or behind us and we may never tune in to the readings at all.  
But still they are there, under-around-and through our experience, quietly permeating, percolating.

Let us assume for a moment that most of the time these ancient voices become contemporary voices of authority, that if only in some small part, we are transformed by what we encounter in Scripture. Where does the authority of this encounter lie?  
What is the spark for transformation?  
Is it the interpreter, the preacher?  
I think not, although she may be a vessel of authority.

Is it "because the Bible says so"?  
This may be so for some traditions, and for some people within our own, but this is not, broadly speaking, the Anglican approach to Scripture. We understand Scripture as the "Word of God," not the "words of God."  
We do not view the books of the Bible as a source of rules that outline the right way to live.  
Rather, Scripture gives us an underlying story that provides us with our identity as God's people.  
Every time we encounter Scripture we are invited into the particular story-world of the text, what the great German theologian Karl Barth called "the strange new world within the Bible."

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And so we see, with today's readings:  
that God often anoints for service those whom the world would overlook;  
that we worship a God who promises to meet all our needs  
and whose protecting presence goes with us even in the darkest situations;  
that we who follow Jesus Christ are similarly strengthened  
for the everyday struggle of light against the powers of darkness;  
that Jesus, even when absent from the action of the story,  
is still the main issue at stake in human life.

But this is what I heard. What about you?  
The ancient rabbis said that every word of the Torah,  
the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, has 600,000 faces;  
that is, layers of meaning or entrances,  
one for each of the children of Israel who stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai.  
Each face is turned to only one of them.  
They alone can see it and decipher it.  
Each person has their own unique access to revelation.  
And that means when I read Scripture, when I hear Scripture, I can't do it on my own.  
Scripture is, as I have already alluded, our tribal story,  
our common communal lore as Christians.  
I won't know what it means, I will not know what its truth is, without you.

And so we have authority vested in community,  
authority not as power imposed from above but as something granted from below.  
The nature of the authority of Scripture for Anglicans is its continuing ability  
to influence or inspire, rather than its power to command.  
We give authority to Scripture because we find in it something true,  
a source of wisdom and guidance that holds true over time.  
Scripture comes alive, makes a claim on us, carries authority in those times and places  
where communities have been drawn into the redemptive drama charted on its pages  
and have there discovered vision, hope, identity and encounter with God.

So this Holy Week—really, every time you are encountered by Scripture—  
I hope you will do more than passively receive the Word.  
Struggle to meet it, to find out what it has to say to you,  
and then share your revelation with others.  
What is it that shapes you, that feeds you,  
What is it that you will continue to hold up and bear witness to?  
Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people. Thanks be to God.

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