

Do you like reading Letters to the Editor in newspapers and periodicals? I do. This past week I read such a letter in a British Catholic publication. Its main point was to suggest we get rid of the Bible readings during Mass and get some more pertinent readings. Subsequent letters were divided in agreeing or disagreeing with such a sentiment. Do you want to know what I think? Well, I am going to tell you.

There is some justification for such a change. Some of the readings are too short to really get the gist of the meaning. And many Catholics still do not feel at home with the Bible. I notice the blank stare on people's faces as the scriptures are proclaimed – right over their head as the saying goes. Wouldn't it be more advantageous to hear words from Pope Francis, as well as David Brooks or Mary Oliver? Yes, there are some advantages.

Personally I believe this would be a tremendous loss. It would contribute to the further dumbing down of America and Christianity. Our minds have gotten used to quick, entertaining messages, such as TV commercials, and we have lost something. We, and I include our young people, are losing our ability to read, to write, to think. Our Religion has also been hijacked by fundamentalists and literalists. Images, metaphors, deeper meanings evade our thinking. Science and factual knowledge has taken over our mind, mainly the left brain, to the loss of right brain art, poetry, imagery. The Bible is not a book of facts. It is story, image, above all deeper meaning to what our true self, our human self is really about. It helps to appreciate poetry as well as art to comprehend God's Word. W. H. Auden once defined poetry as the clear expression of mixed feelings. Poets, artists and mystics know deep human reality before most of us recognize it.

Let's look at this Mass. It is ritual. It is poetry, imagery, music, color, movement which all portray deeper meaning. The first half of the Mass is the Liturgy of the Word which is the real presence of Christ preparing us for the Liturgy of the Altar to follow. When Kathy and David come to the ambo, each one is Christ as he used to come to synagogues, take up the scroll and proclaim the Word of God. It is Christ speaking to us, teaching us, healing us. If we have entered here in a spirit of prayer, we are prepared to attentively listen.

In this light let's look at today's readings. First is the Book of Sirach. This comes from the last books of the Old Testament which are called wisdom writings. There

is no plot line or orderly teaching. There is no catechism questions and answers. It is about more than good behavior. It is about how to be human. Wisdom breathes perspectives on life. “When a sieve is shaken the refuse appears, so do one’s faults when one speaks.” An image comparing the separation of gathering the harvest separating the grain from the droppings of the Oxen as they move along. Two other images, that of a kiln and a tree, follow. They all refer to the recognition of truth in human speech. The truth we speak must be separated from the refuse. Speaking the truth today can refer to church authorities, political figures, advertisers, and includes our own truthfulness, avoiding ego-centered embellishment, gossip and even lies. There is quite a bit in this short reading but requires the reflection of Lectio Divina to let it touch our heart.

The reading from Saint Paul plays with images of the body, death, sin, the risen or imperishable body. Not a scientific explanation of resurrection but a promise of new life after death. This fifteenth chapter of First Corinthians is really loaded.

And then the gospel. What do you think of blind leaders, taking the log out of your eye, trees that bear fruit? I don’t believe you can read this text without realizing Jesus is speaking with humor and exaggeration. Don’t take him literally but certainly do take him seriously!

Lent is a good time to open oneself to the Word of God. Lectio Divina is a great Lenten practice. Read, simply re-read, meditate, pray over a text. If you don’t understand it literally, play with the images. It will come to you later. Lectio Divina is basically a relationship to God who is speaking. Of course we don’t always understand but we open ourselves to this God who loves us and shares these words with us. In another parable, Jesus says he is the sower. He plants seeds and we learn patience to listen, let the word germinate, and eventually taste the fruit of our relationship.

A Blessed and fruitful Lent to all of you. If today you hear God’s voice, harden not your hearts.

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