

Signs and Portents – The need to interpret the Scriptures.

18 November 18

2nd before Advent Fr Michael

It has often been said that the Bible, being such a vast book, one can find a sentence in it to back up any viewpoint or argument that you may wish to put forward, whether for good or evil.

Reading this morning's scripture passages I was immediately made aware of how important the interpretation of the Bible really is. These passages refer very specifically to the end of time, to what theologians call 'eschatology'. The end of the present age, the 'Day of the Lord' as St. Paul refers to it, was very much in the minds of the early believers. They expected the end of the present existence and the Second Coming of Jesus at any moment. That was how they had interpreted the words of Jesus. But as believers started to die and even a generation pass away, and Jesus didn't return, reinterpretation of the words of the Lord had to take place.

Of course this is just one example of how interpretation of the Bible is important, and how with each generation we look again at the scriptures and find new things, new meanings, even new evidence which alters our perspective. This even happens in our own lives, as we grow to maturity and question the world around us and our faith and beliefs. As a small child I accepted that the world really did get flooded and that God saved Noah and his family and all the animals through his instructions of how to build the Ark. As one gets a little older you realise that this is a story or myth which has deep and profound meanings which are as important as if it really had happened in the way described.

Throughout history there have been groups of people who resist such interpretations of the Bible, and of course we have people like that even today. To come back to our readings this morning, the natural signs which the evangelist Mark has Jesus proclaiming are standard 'apocalyptic writing' of that period and of much of the Old Testament. These signs are not specific events. Apocalyptic writing of the type we have heard this morning or that we read in the book of Revelations or Daniel has purposes beyond the literal. To quote the Cambridge Theologian, John Bowker, "Apocalyptic writings are those that reveal and make known things that would otherwise remain hidden. As prophecy ceases in Israel, so apocalyptic (writing) became increasingly important." Some of them are guided tours of the heavenly realms, others are maps of the future. In all, evil forces and hostile enemies are defeated, the wicked are judged, and God is the victor in triumph. And so they are a comfort to the reader. Although anyone wading through that difficult book Revelations, as I am doing at morning prayer at the moment, might be hard pressed to agree to find much of comfort in the reading of the bulk of it, yet comfort is to be found in passages such as in chapter 21, "And there will be no more tears, neither sorrow or crying, for the former things have passed away."

Much of apocalyptic writing is in code form. This has the effect that each generation can find new significance in the deciphering of the codes. That is why through history endless claims are made, usually by religious enthusiasts, (perhaps I should call some of them 'fundamentalists!'), that the true meaning of the codes in Daniel or Revelations has been discovered, and that the end of the world is at hand. It may well be at hand, but not because of the apocalyptic prediction. It was a way in which the persecuted faithful were encouraged to stand firm.

Scholars see the passage from Mark as his attempt to dampen down enthusiasm or over-enthusiasm for the end of time. He points instead to the suddenness of the end and thereby emphasising constant readiness and vigilance. This readiness for Christ's Second Coming is as relevant today as it was nearly 2000 years ago. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews calls his readers and equally ourselves to encourage one another in the perfecting of belief, the sanctification of community, in other words that faith, hope and love abide in the community.

I'm sure we have all met people who can quote chapter and verse of the Bible and they have remarkable memories for wonderful passages that warn or correct, and they have the Christian ethic of love at the heart of all their Bible quoting, but it sometimes goes wrong. The interpretation is wrong or misguided. Let us not forget that 'if we cut our hair' Lev. 19. Verse 27, we are going to be sent to hell! Likewise if we 'trim our beards', Lev. 19., eat fruit from a tree less than five years old, Lev. 19, or collect interest on a loan, Ex. 22. 25. And then there are the more uncomfortable passages! The ancient laws about menstruation, where to have intercourse with a woman during her period brought execution by stoning, burning or strangulation, Lev. 18.19 & 15. 19-24. Similarly in Leviticus 20. 13, homosexuals should be put to death; Oh dear, what am I doing up here! Over the centuries millions of people have been stoned to death, burnt alive or hanged as a result of this and other teachings from the Bible.

(point finger around congregation)

And of course the worst crime of them all! The wearing of a poly-cotton shirt will definitely condemn you to hell! Lev. 19.19.

Why do some Christians today choose to condemn some people in society on the basis of these ancient laws, and yet not take it to its logical conclusion, that choosing which laws we will obey and which we will ignore makes a mockery of Scripture and our faith. Interpretation of the Scriptures is not just a scholarly activity, however helpful that might be, but is at the very heart of our calling as Christians, the 'perfecting of believers', as in our passage from Hebrews today. I am reminded of that worship song that has the words,

"Sing of the Lord's goodness, Father of all wisdom,
come to him and bless his name.
His word he has spoken, one bread he has broken,
new life he now gives to all."

Amen.