

Today I wish to review the role of the sacred writings as we look to how we learn of God through history. In this search for scriptural meaning, I am indebted to the Interpreter's Bible for assistance and clarity of thought.

The Bible is an interesting composite of books and writings where the common thread is the relationship of men and women with God and their expanding understanding of what that means for humankind. While the Bible is based around a history of a people in a particular place we know as the Middle East, it is universal in its application to all human experience in the past, present and future.

Our Old Testament reading came from Deuteronomy, the fifth book in the Old Testament. As you know, the first five books of the Old Testament are named Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. These five books form what is known as the Pentateuch. If you have seen synagogues on film or visited a synagogue yourself, you will have seen the sacred scrolls from which, each Sabbath gathering, the sacred word is read. Pentateuch means five books and to every Jew, these books form the heart and soul of their faith. The Pentateuch is also popularly known as the "Five Books of Moses" though Moses is not the author of any of them.

Genesis means "beginning" and is the first book of The Pentateuch. These five books begin in Genesis with the Creation story which highlights God's active, thoughtful and purposeful creation of the world and all life which inhabits that world. It was into this world that God placed his special creation, men and women, to be in relationship with Him. The Pentateuch ends with the death of Moses just before the Israelites enter into the Promised Land after years of slavery in Egypt and years of wandering the desert.

Genesis traces and verifies the roots of God's chosen people, the Israelites, through the call of Abraham and Sarah to form a new people, the leadership of their son Isaac and his son Jacob and the Israelite ultimate descent into Egypt. It also clearly establishes the uniqueness of Yahweh, the one God they worshipped and followed. So we have a historical document which is also a theological document which centres on a people beginning to see themselves as a special group chosen by the one true God of the universe.

Exodus, the second book, speaks to the famine which came over Israel, the move to Egypt under Joseph and the eventual enslavement of the Israelites by the Egyptians. It also speaks to the Covenant established by God between Himself and the twelve tribes of Israel. While the Israelite exodus from Egypt does not occur in this book, the Book of Exodus provides us with the most explicit historical memories we have of the actual events that gave rise to and continued to nurture the community of Israel and its distinctive tradition.

The third book of the Pentateuch is called Leviticus. This name denotes the book pertaining to the persons and duties of the Levitical priests thus named because they came to be considered as the sons of the tribe of Levi, one of the twelve tribes. This book is a codification of religious duties, ways of behaving and codification of worship forms. For the pious Jew, this book is their blueprint. St. Paul would have been steeped in this book as a rabbinical scholar before he met Christ on the Damascus road and became the great Christian leader of the faith community.

The fourth book in the Pentateuch is called Numbers. This book tells the epic story of God's constitution of you and His calling of Israel to be his chosen people. Numbers speaks of the tribes, Moses' leadership, the march of the tribes in the wilderness, their battles, the appointment of Joshua as the commander of their fighting men, and their gradually becoming a people determined to move into a land of their own. Moses has grown old and is unable to lead them any longer into the holy land. Joshua becomes their leader, the heir to Moses and Moses' brother Aaron as well as Moses' sister Miriam.

Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Pentateuch, pauses in this historical documentation of the movement of the Israelites. The book's message is written in the form of the final words of their beloved leader Moses who tries to help the people understand their role as a chosen people before God.

The basic questions of the faith are faced in Deuteronomy. What is the meaning of God's great acts in saving and preserving a chosen people who appear so manifestly not to deserve or merit God's gracious consideration? What is the meaning of the covenant and the revelation of God's will within it? What are the peculiar temptations of the nation in its land and where lies its security as a people? In giving the answers to these questions Deuteronomy attains a sober, earnest, and moving eloquence which sets it apart from all other literature in the Bible.

The theme of the work is summarized in Chapter 10: 12-22 as powerfully as in any passage. God's requirement is that his people shall revere him, love him, and serve him with all their heart and soul. The heaven and the earth and all therein belongs to God. He is "God of gods, and Lord of lords" whose will cannot be bent or thwarted by any form of human bribery. His is a righteousness unlike any other righteousness, and the life and economy of the nation must not only be governed by it but must also express it in its actions and activities. He is the one true God who brought the nation into being. To quote from Deuteronomy: "Him shall you serve, and to him shall you cling...He is your praise, and he is your God, that has done for you these great and terrible things, which your eyes have seen."

People through time have been moved to humble reverence by these beautiful words and so should we be moved by their powerful simplicity and truth.

According to Matthew 4: 1-11, Jesus at the beginning of his ministry answered the tempter by quoting three passages from Deuteronomy: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (8.3)

“You shall not tempt the Lord your God” (6:16) and “You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve” (6:13). The primary requirement of God, as understood by both Jews and Christians, is the Deuteronomy translation of the first of the Ten Commandments into this positive form: “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

A point of interest here: Deuteronomy is one of four books in the Old Testament which New Testament writers most frequently cite, Deuteronomy being quoted some 83 times. Only six of the New Testament books fail to allude to Deuteronomy. In case you were wondering, the other three Old Testament books besides Deuteronomy most quoted in the New Testament are Genesis, Isaiah and the Psalms.

So, we need to remember that part of the inheritance of Christianity from Judaism was a scripture embodied in what became known to the church as the Old Testament. Jesus in his preaching constantly referred to this scripture, and the disciples followed him in this practice. They accepted as a religious fact, which directly concerned them, the existence among the Jews of a body of writings received as sacred and authoritative.

Now we come to the New Testament. Here the gospel – euangelion – is the term most used in the New Testament to denote the Christian message. This word may be directly translated as “evangelize”. However, the word, both in Hebrew and Greek, actually demands the three English words, “bring good tidings,” if its full force is to be felt

The word means “the good news.” Sometimes it appears as “the gospel of God,” meaning not merely good news about God but good news from God, who himself has taken the initiative in making it known to humankind. At other times the gospel is spoken of as “the gospel of Christ,” which again means not only good news preached by Christ but good news whose content is Christ himself beginning with his human ministry.

The noun “the gospel” occurs only in the New Testament. The gospel in the New Testament also concerns a historical event. It is an event of supreme significance, the crowning divine event in the history of the nation and also the moment of its overwhelming tragedy. It is the appearance of the divine Son Jesus who is both messenger and message. However, the chosen nation crucifies the messenger and despises his message. This is the main theme of the four Gospels. It is also the foundation of their gospel message. Even through the death of his Son on the cross, God achieved deliverance for the whole world by the “mighty act” of raising his Son from the dead.

Thus the narrative of the Gospels is not a mere chronicle of events and sayings. The four evangelists present a historical portrait of Jesus who not only spoke but was the “word made flesh.” God spoke in the person and ministry of the “Son”.

In the New Testament, it is assumed that no disciple of Christ can make adequate profession of his or her faith apart from membership in the Christian community, viewed as the new Israel. The church exists not only to preach the gospel: the manner of its corporate life and its moral teaching are both needed to give reality to the gospel

message. There are no solitary Christians in the pages of the New Testament. The forgiving love of God offered to the sinner is the central theme of the euangelion. Jesus makes it very plain that the proclamation and the acceptance of the father's forgiveness must be accompanied by a forgiving spirit within the community itself.

It **was and is** the sight of apparently irreconcilable personal dislikes overcome and broken relationships healed within the church of Christ that gave a real and practical significance to the message of "peace" and "reconciliation" with God. This reconciliation between people most moved the pagan mind to understand what "salvation" meant. The corporate life of the community made its members feel that they were fellow workers with God in his own attitude towards the sinful. "Love your enemies... and you will be sons of the Most High" (Luke 6:35). "Be kind to one another... Forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32).

As men and women, we hear Christ's tender and passionate invitation, "Come unto me and I will give you rest." However, this also comes with a demand, "Take up the cross and follow me," even though that way may mean suffering, sacrifice, and ultimately death.

The love of God is seen as both uncompromising in its moral requirements and limitless in its compassion and forgiveness. To St. Paul, the church in its corporate or community life is the "body of Christ," the hands and feet and voice of the living Lord, who is thus continually made audible and visible in the world.

So, with this background in our faith, we need feel no shame in the gospel we experience and the gospel we proclaim. We are the heirs to the Old Testament and the New Testament faithful who also attempted to follow God in their life. The people of the Old Testament yearned for the coming of the Son of God, the one to be called the Messiah. We have the advantage of knowing God's great act of love in Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour.

I have no shame in the gospel we proclaim. God lives and continues to walk with his people. God still calls us into the community of the church and urges us to go into the larger community as men and women alive with the knowledge of God's love and forgiving power. If this be so, how can we be anything but a thankful and vibrant people eager to share what we know and have experienced with those around us.

Thanks be to God. Alleluia!

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