

Spiritual Practices-Being Read by a Book-Praying with Scripture

Hebrews 4: 12-13 & Romans 12: 1-3

(October 21, 2018)

I would like to start this reflection with a bible quiz. True or false, Eve had a date with Adam. It was actually an apple. How long did Cain hate his brother? As long as he was Abel. How do we know that Jesus could have been a barista? It says so in the book of He Brews (Hebrews). In a humorous, or perhaps not so humorous way, these riddles point out one approach to reading the bible—the bible as a source of information about God, the bible as a source of historical facts or an accounting of events that actually took place. For centuries, that way of reading the bible went unquestioned. Then along came the enlightenment in the seventeenth century, the rise of scientific enquiry and the questioning of everything. It is quite clear from Darwin's theory of evolution the world was not created in six days. Historical and literary criticism shows us that the gospels were written decades after Jesus' death and are not eyewitness accounts of his life. We know that some of the letters in scripture claiming to be written by Paul were not, but rather by admirers of his who sought to imitate his style.

Some Christians considered all this a threat to the integrity of scripture and the faith and so today among evangelicals, we have an insistence on the inerrancy and literalism of the bible that is unmatched in the history of Christianity. Large swaths of Christians ignore science and other academic approaches to scripture for the sake of what they see as maintaining the integrity of the bible.

The reality however is as a source of information, as a chronicler of historic events the bible has become less and less reliable. Those of us who cannot ignore scientific and academic criticism are forced to re-define and re-evaluate the place of scripture in our lives. Some have said that it has no place in their lives; scientific and academic criticism has rendered the bible irrelevant. The bible is a relic of a bygone time, full of practices and ways of being from which we want to distance ourselves—slavery, polygamy, misogyny, patriarchy, homophobia, genocide and on and on.

Yet, there are some of us who despite our embracing of critical approaches to scripture and our acknowledgement of some of its horrors have been transformed by these ancient stories. That happens I think when we stop seeing the bible as a book of facts, history and beliefs and more as a way into a relationship. What would happen if we were to read scripture like a letter or a long e-mail from a friend or a lover?¹ Certainly, in this kind of reading you get information. You get updates on what has been happening in the other person's life, news about events, birthdays, anniversaries, but information is secondary to the purpose of such correspondence. The joy of such writing and reading is that it pulls you into a relationship where you strengthen the bonds between yourself and another. I want to focus my reflection on what happens when we

¹ Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, p. 17.

use scripture as a way into that relationship. The insert in your bulletin explains the practical aspects of how to go about the practice of praying with scripture.

To truly appreciate scripture and benefit from it you need to read it as it was intended—as a way into a relationship with the Divine, with God. It is a relationship that meets us where we are, but does not leave us where we are², it changes you. Scripture reading is not about information; it is about transformation. As Paul says, we are called not to be conformed, but to be transformed.³ Let me give you an example. When I was at Emmanuel College in Toronto, my Old Testament professor was a brilliant scholar by the name of Gerry Sheppard. One day in class, we were looking at a particularly difficult passage of scripture, the rape of Tamar in Second Samuel⁴. It is a terrible story. We were filled with indignation as we judged this piece of scripture and questioned its value. Professor Sheppard acknowledged the horrendousness of the scripture. But, he then looked at us with his own sense of indignation and asked us if we could think of practices and incidents in our time that might cause future generations to judge our society and us just as harshly, and of course, we could. There was a change in the room; we realized how our righteous indignation and judgement had prevented us from turning the lens of scripture on our times and ourselves. Our critique, though understandable and valid in many ways was missing an essential element—humility. Scripture had evoked some unpleasant aspects of our personalities; scripture had revealed a lack of humility on our part. Professor Sheppard concluded the class by saying with a wry smile, “How surprising it is to read this book (the bible) and find that you are the one being read.” The experience brought fresh perspective to the words from Hebrews, “...the word of God is living and active...”⁵

Scripture reads us, isn't that an interesting way to approach the bible? Scripture can bring to the surface that which we prefer to keep hidden, it evokes emotion, and it confronts us with our prejudices, biases, weaknesses and shame. Scripture opens us up and invites us to surrender and let God shape us. This can happen especially if you make scripture reading a long-term practice and come back to the same scripture at different points in your life. Let me give you an example.

For years I hated, loathed, despised the story of the prodigal son⁶, I could not understand what Jesus had been getting at. It seemed so unfair to me the way the older brother had been treated. I am an eldest son, I have two young brothers, I grew up with the belief that love was something you earned by right behavior, competence and loyalty. Faith therefore was more like a contract where you followed certain rules and did certain moral and religious things in exchange for God's love. If you are honest at all with yourself this way of thinking breaks down over time, you make mistakes, you hurt

² Adapted from Anne Lamott, *Travelling Mercies, Some Thoughts on Faith*.

³ |Romans 12: 2.

⁴ 2 Samuel 13

⁵ 4:12.

⁶ Luke 15: 11-32

people, and you discover your weaknesses. I remember hearing or reading the story at a different point in my life and being surprised that I identified with the younger brother. I identified as the one in need of grace and mercy, as the one who had been given, not earned love. It became apparent to me how judgmental of myself and others I had been, how controlling I had been all my life, how much I had kept God at a safe distance. It was a game changing moment as they say in sports, to see myself not as the resentful older brother who had earned everything he had ever gotten in life, but instead to see myself as the wounded and grateful younger brother who was being lavishly welcomed home. The key with scripture as a personal spiritual practice is not necessarily to look for some overarching meaning that you process intellectually. The key is to pay attention to your own reactions and then get curious; why do I identify with this character? Why I am getting so angry, sad or indignant? What in my own life circumstances has caused me to react this way?

Praying with scripture is an invitation into a relationship where we lay ourselves bare before God for the purposes of transformation: dying to self and rising to God. It is a relationship that can grow deeper and take you deeper as the practice becomes a part of your life. The bible becomes not a book of beliefs, answers and facts but a way to journey with God into the everyday. Over time, you find that you are not just reading the words, but becoming the words—shaped more and more in the image of God. I believe that is the task for all followers of Jesus, to take the words of scripture and embody them, live them, to follow in the steps of Jesus and become the word made flesh, to become sons and daughters of God, to experience that closeness and know that peace. Amen.