

## The Second Naivete

Proper 22A - October 2, 2011

Last week we started a two part teaching on how to approach & interpret the Bible. It was a little academic & I worried that it may have been a bit too dry. That reminds me of a Sunday school teacher who asked the children just before she dismissed them to go to church, "And why is it necessary to be quiet in church?" Annie replied, "Because people are sleeping."

Just to refresh our memories about what was said last Sunday, we began talking about the very important topics of the nature of the Bible & how best to interpret it. We said that people, as they have wrestled with these questions, have distributed themselves across a continuum between two poles: **The Church of the Authority of Words** a.k.a. The Church of the Sacred Object versus The Church of I Can No Longer Believe Nor Stomach This Any More a.k.a. **The Church in Exile**. We noted that questions about the authority of the Bible continue to haunt & divide the Christian community around the world & so the topic remains relevant today.

**One of the key principles that defines what it means to be an Episcopal Christian is our commitment to openness, moderation and balance. Historically, we have spoken of this approach as the "Via Media,"** the middle way between extremes. So it is appropriate to ask this morning, "What is a middle way, a Via Media between the approach that uses the Bible as a historical, moral and scientific textbook that is supposed to provide clear & certain answers-facts to all of life's questions and the approach that says, "I guess, since I am unwilling to simply accept whatever I am told I have to think & believe in order to be a Christian, I will just leave the Church & never return"? Is there a rational, reasonable & spiritually vital via media between these two positions? Yes, there is.

**I am going to share an approach that contains four principles, the first two of which are about the basket of assumptions we use to think about the Bible before we ever open it;** before we read even one word of it. Ironically, it is the content of this list of beginning assumptions that most divides conservatives & liberals rather than the other interpretive methods applied after the text is opened.

**Principle #1: There is no such a thing as conservative knowledge versus liberal knowledge; there is only knowledge.** Most within the Christian community seem to think that knowledge can be divided into ideological camps.  $2 + 2 = 4$  is a conservative artifact of knowledge while  $9 \div 3 = 3$  is liberal. If that sounds absurd, that's because it is. Knowledge has no political or ideological labels attached to it until we attach them. Furthermore, if scholarship is defined as the search for authentic, reliable, peer reviewed knowledge; if scholarship is defined as the disciplined application of a set of standards & methods to a body of study, then it makes no sense to think in terms of conservative & liberal scholarship & yet, we use this kind of language regularly. When any scholar arrives at a place where the labels conservative or liberal are applicable, she has become something other than one seeking unbiased, objective, reliable knowledge. She has become a polemicist; someone with an ideological agenda who is willing to mention the facts that support that agenda & ignore facts that do not.

So let's be honest, the Christian community is divided on the basis of a set of assumptions about how the Bible is to be interpreted, chosen consciously or without awareness, before the Bible is ever opened. For most, these assumptions have more to do with **comfort & emotional security** than any honest, courageous search for knowledge. **So all of us have to ask ourselves;** are we going to demand that the Bible be read & interpreted only in ways that are consistent with what we already think?

**Principle #2: We will be consistent in our search for knowledge by applying the same disciplined methods of study & research to the Bible as those used in all other areas of**

**study & research. The Bible cannot & should not be exempted from the assumptions & methods used by scholars & researchers in all other areas of knowledge: physics, literature, biology, psychology, etc.** Do we really want to make authentic, unbiased scholarship the enemy as if our faith in God must be protected from knowledge? Think of it this way...You have a sick child who needs a doctor. Which medical expert are you likely to choose; the one who attended Harvard Medical School & did her pediatric residency at John Hopkins, or the one who attended "Do Drop In" Med in Granada? Of course you are going to choose the best trained, best educated, most scientifically grounded doctor possible & you will not care about his ethnic, religious, cultural or racial background. So how is it rational to assume that our pursuit of knowledge in the areas of biblical interpretation & religion must be based upon approaches that insure us of ideology purity & emotional comfort? Why do we assume that there is conservative scholarship vs liberal scholarship when interpreting the Bible when we would never assume there is conservative vs liberal scholarship in medicine, physics, biology, and chemistry?

**Principle #3: With the first two principles in place, we can now study the Bible as literature, as a product of the human spirit.** We can apply the same standards & methods used by scholars & researchers in all other areas of the humanities to study our Sacred Text. We can now apply all of the methods of contemporary scholarship: literary source, form & historical criticism. And we can then begin to honestly recognize & discuss how oral traditions become written texts, the historical & cultural contexts of those oral & written traditions, & the wide variety of different kinds of literature contained with the Bible itself. This, for the most part, means the death of literalism & the liberation that comes with being free to see symbolic language as symbolic language; the inspiration derived from uncovering the power of myth; the power of symbolic, metaphorical, representational story.

**Principle #4: And finally, having learned all we can about the communities that created the Bible as well as all that contemporary scholarship can teach us, we suspend all of that. clear our heads & read the Bible with, what Paul Ricoeur calls, "a second naivete."** In other words, we enter into the stories of the Bible in a manner similar to our entrance into a great art museum. We let ourselves experience the story as we would let that beautiful or disturbing painting on the wall into our hearts. According to Ricoeur, the rational forces brought to our civilization through modernity have made it difficult to accept religion or scripture in the concrete sense. Once subjected to rational inspection, the literal meanings of religion really do not hold up. Once a person allows himself to take a step back from religious belief, and examine it critically, he really cannot believe the simple, naïve, concepts his religion teaches at face value. Ricoeur suggested that there is a way to engage faith in what he called a 'second naiveté' way.

***"Beyond the desert of criticism, we wish to be called again. In this second naiveté, scripture and religious concepts are seen as symbols, (i.e. metaphorical constructs) that we now interpret in the full responsibility of autonomous thought. This means we begin to reengage the Bible at a different level. We move toward interpreting them for ourselves, in the light of having assumed personal responsibility for our beliefs. We choose to move toward our own interpretation that recognizes these concepts as symbols of something greater than that which the words or teachings imply in their literal sense. This "second naiveté is roughly equivalent to engaging the Bible as mystics." (www.exploring-spiritual-development.com /Paul-Ricoeur.html)***

Such an approach will free us from the holy wars spawned by the quest for certainty while supporting an intellectually sound, yet spiritually inspirational & liberating experiencing of the sacred texts. In other words, we do not have to choose between knowledge & inspiration, between critical analysis & a consciousness-expanding, transcendent experience of God. AMEN.