

Reflection - The Bible and the Early Church

Reading: Parable of Good Samaritan: Luke 10:25-37

I have been asked to talk to you about the ways the early Church read and interpreted the scriptures. To do so, I must draw a contrast with two essentially modern ways of reading the Bible. There is the modern scholarly approach, which sets aside for the moment any claims for divine inspiration or over-arching unity and instead studies the books of the Bible as a collection of ancient near-Eastern texts, seeking to discern their original settings, intended audiences, likely developments and redactions. This is an approach which can be helpful, but which tends to dissolve the texts, which at first reading seem to have unity, into a series of disparate and disconnected sources or redactions. Then, in contrast to and reaction against the scholarly approach, there is the modern fundamentalist or rather literalist approach, which interprets inspiration as literal dictation, as though every word in the Bible was spoken directly by God to the putative author, including presumably, all the repetitions and contradictions to be found between the Bible's different books. What is modern about this approach is that, in some ways, like the scholars, it seeks to extract from the text a single set of incontrovertible facts, unambiguous and free of all interpretation, understood only on one level. Modern scholars treat the Bible as a vast archaeological dig, full of gaping holes and neatly piled and labelled fragments of Urtexts, whilst modern literalists treat the Bible as though it were an A Level science textbook dropped from heaven, or the single line of tickertape newsfeed scrolling at the bottom of a television.

By contrast, the Early Church saw the scriptures as a single, sacred, luminous text, centred on Jesus, who is the Word within and behind every word of scripture in both the Old and the New Testaments. Because he is meaning itself, he gives every passage of scripture many meanings and not just one. The stained-glass windows in King's College Chapel give a vivid picture of this approach. Scenes from both testaments are placed in parallel, in a way of reading called typology. The scene of Isaac carrying the wood for his own sacrifice becomes a type or foreshadowing of Christ carrying the cross. Indeed, all the scenes of the New Testament are seen as luminous and long-awaited fulfilments of the Old. Does this freedom to find new allegorical or typological meanings behind the literal narrative mean that early Christians felt free to make things up as they went along? Not at all! They had clear criteria for interpretation. For them Jesus Christ himself, gives the interpretive key to the whole of the scriptures, and that key is love. The benchmark was set by St. Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430 CE) who bridges the gap between the late classical and early medieval periods and whose writing was hugely influential. St Augustine, in his little book *De Doctrina Christiana*, sets out clear criteria for interpretation: He points to Jesus' own summary of all scripture in the two great commandments to love God and our neighbour, and says: 'we should clearly understand that the fulfilment and the end of the Law, and of all Holy Scripture, is ... love.' He goes on to say:

Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of God and our neighbour, does not yet understand them as he ought. If, on the other hand, a man draws a meaning from them that may be used for the building up of love, even though he does not happen upon the precise meaning which the author whom he reads intended to express in that place, his error is not pernicious, and he is wholly clear from the charge of deception. ... Whoever takes another meaning out of Scripture than the writer intended,

goes astray, but not through any falsehood in Scripture. Nevertheless, as I was going to say, if his mistaken interpretation tends to build up love, which is the end of the commandment, he goes astray in much the same way as a man who by mistake quits the high road, but yet reaches through the fields the same place to which the road leads.

What does all this mean in practice, and what might we usefully learn from it now? Let us take the example of the Gospel reading we have heard this morning. In one sense, it scarcely needs interpretation, we can read it in its Gospel context, as an answer to the question 'who is my neighbour?', an exemplary story of what it means to fulfil the commandment 'love your neighbour as yourself'. That is good as far as it goes, but it puts it firmly in the realm of law and duty, of moral exhortation, another item in the long list of things we ought to do. Read in that way only there is very little of grace and gift in it. But here is how medieval people read it:

Christ does not ask us to do anything that he has not already done for us and is not already doing in us. For, allegorically, Christ himself is the Good Samaritan: it is all of us, the whole of humanity, who have in our fall, fallen into the hands of robbers, been robbed of paradise, beaten up and left half dead. The Priest and the Levite who pass by on the other side are all those former religious systems, full of outer cleansing, that never really touched or healed our wounds. But just as the Samaritan is moved with pity and crosses the road, comes near, so Christ in Heaven crosses the great gap between God and humanity, comes down to be with us and to bind our wounds. He 'pours oil and wine on them': the oil of chrism in baptism and the wine of communion. He put us 'on his own animal', that is, he lends his own strength to support us. Then he brings us to the Inn, which for medieval readers, is the Church itself, the great Inn or Hospital in which we are nurtured back to life. Just as the Samaritan undertakes to pay the bill, and to return and give the innkeeper full recompense, so Christ, by the merits of his death and passion, pays the bill for our transgressions, forgives the debt of our sins, and promises that he will return and make all well again. This extra layer of meaning does not prevent me from seeing the moral lesson of the parable and going out to help my neighbour, on the contrary it gives me an even stronger motivation to do so, and takes away any anxiety I may have, since I know that any failings of mine in this endeavour will be more than made up for by Jesus.

I am glad to avail myself of modern scholarship, but the Medieval way of reading the Bible helps me to put the pieces back together and read the Bible as a single, luminous many layered poem that kindles my imagination for Christ. Amen.

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