



Richmond Hill Reflections

“What’s Up with the Bible?” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)
August 23, 2020, Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Reading: Matthew 16:13-20; Excerpt from *Crow and Weasel* by Barry Lopez

Unlike the last two weeks, today’s word isn’t in our gospel, though present conceptually in much of it. Not surprising given that it is such an important word, concept really, factoring in so much of what Christians do. The word is “bible”. I felt it was important to talk about this book before moving to other words. It plays a big part as a source of the vision of God’s reign that we heard is foundational to the word “Lord”. People turn to it as a way to nurture their “faith”. Plus, the next words are read through a lens of how people interpret various texts. Let’s look at this word, this concept, this book.

Now I say book, but the bible is more of a library. This is important, because a book is usually one genre or another. The type of book influences how it is approached. It could be a novel, poetry, a history or collection of legends. The bible is all these and more. In it there are genealogies, wise sayings, words of challenge, prayers. I read a psalm differently than a prophetic text. The context shapes my experience, as does when it was written and for whom. Is it a response to a situation, like a letter, or a reflection on an experience, like a gospel, written long after the events it refers to? In this regard, each gospel, though a narrative, isn’t a biography but a theology, the particular gospel writer’s answer to Jesus’ question: “Who do you say I am?” Each gospel is a reflection on Peter’s response, what they understand “you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God” to mean.

This is why the bible is important to so many people. Across the whole library you experience an evolving theology, the “Old” or First Testament an exploration by the tribes of Israel of who the living God is and how they are to be in divine covenant. That aspect of covenant, relationship, is also key to those of us who identify as Christian. The books of the “New” Testament do more than outline Jesus’ “way”, but explore who he is and what it means not just to believe he’s the “Christ” but how we are changed for being in relationship with him. And like other sacred texts, the bible has had an individual and communal impact. For generations it’s been experienced as a source of wisdom.

This is why we give it pride of place. The stories are a way of knowing both who we are and who we can be. This is Barry Lopez’s point about stories. They are a way that we care for each other, a source of identity, both grounding and pushing us. The bible is like a cut gem. You look at a story and see something one day, then notice another facet the next time. The story is the same, but you aren’t. And neither is what’s going on in the world. Through the Spirit, the bible is a medium by which we have been engaging in a dialogue with God for millennia. In this the bible is a real gift.

And in this the bible's a real challenge. Historically we have given the bible a lot of weight, especially as Protestants, maybe even too much. I wonder if we've misused Luther's rally of *sola scriptura*. The saying was a critique of Catholic emphasis on church teaching, known as Tradition, and a desire to get back to our core story rather than the layers of practice built up through the centuries. But just as our core story was obscured, I wonder if some missed Luther's point and over time went from meaning that the bible should be a primary source for theological reflection to the bible is the only authority. Some want to treat it as a science text when speaking about the origin of the Earth, or as a reliable history of Egypt and the Middle East, miraculous sea crossings and all, even when there is archaeological evidence to the contrary. But the bible didn't come from heaven fully written. It was compiled over time. Is it inspired? I believe so. But it was still written by people. No wonder it contradicts itself. It's a source of wisdom but I don't feel exclusively so. I want to learn and grow from many sources: science as well as poetry and plays and the scriptures of other faiths.

In the end I take the bible seriously but not literally. A colleague likes to introduce the bible this way: "Now whether you take what is written in the bible as fact, metaphor, myth or story, listen to these words now for the meaning they hold for you on this day." I like this because it invites me to engage the reading as a source of wisdom whether it happened or not, seek meaning, especially as it applies in this particular moment. The bible isn't fixed. Which is why we keep coming back to it and as we are ready hear critiques we weren't open to before, say about racism, sexism or environmental care.

In this way Luther's *sola scriptura* critique was perhaps an overstatement. Roman Catholic teaching at its core is biblical. For example, Simon being named "rock" is their proof text for papal authority. We don't see the verse that way. We affirm Peter's role but not given exclusive authority, especially not as a succession of popes. But the idea of Tradition is that we're in an ongoing conversation with these sacred stories. We all come to them differently, trusting in Spirit's insight, and like I said about "faith", ideally, we should debate with one another, and grow in the process. This again is the model we see in Judaism. Torah plus Prophets and other writings comprise the Tanakh. But there is also the Talmud. Made up of Mishnah, the written version of the oral law, and Gemara, the record of rabbinic discussions about Mishnah, the Talmud is also taken seriously as a source of wisdom. Unlike seeing the bible as unchanging, this recognizes it as a source of understanding for each time and place. Peter and the church as a whole are given keys to bind and loose, which is what the rabbis do as they discuss and debate. Perhaps Jesus meant for Peter to be a chief rabbi rather than a "pope".

One of the differences between Catholics and Protestants is whether the emphasis is placed on the church or the bible, each arguing that one gives rise to the other. I would argue it is a mutual birthing. The community writes down its story and as it recalls its story is birthed anew. So, you see they go together, a dialogue between people and the bible, and ultimately with God. So, I vote that we keep going back to the bible, not as an unchanging and inerrant authority but as a library of wisdom, knowing that when we read the stories with an open heart, they are sometimes more sustaining than food, uplifting our spirits and reminding us of who we are and who we can be. Amen.