

“Letters from Home”

Homily for 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time based on:

2 Timothy 3:14–4:2

A group of boys and girls was asked, to sum up what they had learned from the New Testament: "Jesus is the star of the New Testament. He was born in Bethlehem in a barn. During His life, Jesus had many arguments with sinners like the Pharisees and the Republicans. Jesus also had twelve opossums. The worst one was Judas Asparagus. Judas was so evil that they named a terrible vegetable after him".

I use this humour to introduce one of my favorite subjects. The wonder and beauty of the Bible. Today I will be concentrating my homily on the reading from 2 Timothy. Here is the clearest teaching in the New Testament about why the Bible is the greatest book ever written. In this passage, we are called to engage with the Scripture in such a way that we come to understand and apply its contents to our lives.

St. Paul invites us to think about the Bible’s personal, providential and pastoral implications so that we will desire to always come to a fuller understanding of Greatest Story Ever Told.

St. Paul is addressing these words to Timothy and begins his explanation of the Bible’s importance as he refers to Timothy’s personal relationship to Scripture.

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it,

15 and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

Why does Paul begin with the conjunction “but”? In the verses immediately preceding this verse he had written:

Indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,¹³ while evil men and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceivers and deceived.

Paul highlights two things here. To live for Jesus Christ will involve persecution – those who will oppose us even to the point of harming us and in extreme cases wanting us dead. This persecution is the result of evil people who will be able to deceive many to turn away from God. And even though the opposition to the Gospel will be intense and those whose lives are bent on evil teaching will be very persuasive, Timothy is to be resolved to stay centred on what he has known from childhood. So the “but” as used here, is a conjunction of contrast. Compared to those deceivers, Timothy you are to continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, always calling to mind who taught you the sacred writings. And who were Timothy’s teachers?

We read over in Acts 16:2 this description of Timothy:

A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer; but his father was a Greek.

In 2nd Timothy 1 St. Paul gives us more detail about Timothy's family. There he writes:

I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you¹

Notice Paul speaks of a "sincere faith". This word means "without hypocrisy". Timothy learned the faith and the scriptures from his maternal forebears whose lives reflected the integrity found in the sacred writings.

Here is the point Paul is making to Timothy and to us. We are to learn the Bible in such a way that it becomes a book that is personally important to us. It will be easier for us to realize its importance when we see others for whom the Bible is of great value and their lives embody a consistency that is sincere.

For those entrusted with teaching the faith, which is all who are here and have the vocation of parenthood, your life is observed by your children. What kind of example are you setting for them? Do they see in you a love for scripture? Do you try to live out a sincere faith?

The same questions need to be addressed to me as a priest, a father in God. If you are going to be receptive to observing the beauty of scripture and making it personally important in your lives, I have a responsibility to embody in my life virtues that make it clear that the Bible's teaching is personally important to me. You need to see in me a deep conviction whereby I show in words and example that I believe the scriptures and know they are able "to instruct me for salvation".

This personal love for the Bible becomes even greater when we discover the providential purposes of God in inspiring the Bible. The word providential means "to look ahead". This is what I mean about the Bible being providential. God was looking ahead, knowing that we would need this Godly inspired book. A theme Paul presents in the next verses of today's reading:

¹ *The Holy Bible*. (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, 2 Ti 1:5). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

¹⁶ All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, *¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.²

When Paul wrote these words “All Scripture” meant the Old Testament. For us, “all scripture” means the 73 books of the Old and New Testament. In 397 AD there was a Council held in Carthage, North Africa, where Church leaders ratified authoritatively the 73 books that make up the Bible. So while the books of the New Testament were written within two generations of the Lord’s life, death, and resurrection, in the Providence of God it would take another 300 years before the list of books that we now have would be definitively declared.

And what was it that needed to be determined to declare these books “inspired”?

In *Dei Verbum*, the Vatican II document on Holy Scripture we have this clear insight into what inspiration means:

For holy mother Church, relying on the belief of the Apostles (see John 20:31; 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:19–20; 3:15–16), holds that the books of both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself. In composing the sacred books, God chose men and while employed by Him they made use of their powers and abilities so that with Him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted.

Another word for inspiration is “breathed”. God breathed his presence so as to inspire the biblical authors to leave us writings that teach, reproof, correct and train. They teach us the truth about who God is and who we are. They reproof us in that they show us those areas where we are given proof of sin. They also correct us so that we no longer need to live in a pattern of sin but we can learn new ways of thinking, and acting. This is so we can be trained to grow in righteous and godly living.

But here is an important thing to realize. Unless the same Holy Spirit who inspired the scripture is inspiring us, the word of God will be a dead letter. It will not move us. If however, we are alive in Christ then we will discover ever more fully the providential nature of Scripture. God anticipated that we would need a book like this so we could be equipped for every good work in the service of the Lord.

Let’s now turn to the pastoral application of the Bible. While it is true that all are encouraged to read the Bible for themselves, the Bible also needs to be authoritatively interpreted. This is where the pastoral relationship to scripture is important. Listen to how Paul states it:

² *The Holy Bible*. (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, 2 Ti 3:16–17). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

4 In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: 2 proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.

One of the most important responsibilities ordained ministers have is the proclamation of the word of God. Deacons, priests, bishops and the Pope have a particular responsibility to scripture. They have to on fire with a personal love of the word of God so they can, with conviction, declare its divine inspiration. This is so they can convince, rebuke and encourage with the utmost patience.

Those called to the office of preaching are to cultivate patience because it takes people time to come to a deeper understanding of how the scripture applies to their lives. It is a work of conversion to realize the whole of the biblical witness is to help us live in the present so that we will be ready in the future to stand before the one who will be the judge of the living and the dead.

St Augustine said of Scripture:

“The Holy Scriptures are our letters from home.”—

Such letters when applied to our lives now help us to realize that while it might be humorous to speak of Judas Asparagus, it is no laughing matter to be ignorant of scripture. As St. Jerome put it, ignorance of scripture is ignorance of Christ.

When you know the Holy Scriptures personal appeal, providential purpose, and pastoral application you will be trained in righteousness so as to live a sincere faith and be instructed in the way of salvation.