

Homily for 3rd Sunday Ordinary Time

Sunday of the Word of God

January 23-24 2021

Book 6 of the Greatest Story Ever Told

On September 30th 2019, the Feast of St. Jerome, who translated the Scripture into Latin, (he died in 420) Pope Francis issued an Apostolic Letter entitled: “He opened their minds”. This title is taken from Luke 24:45 where the evangelist writes:

“He (that is, Jesus) opened their minds to understand the Scriptures”. With this verse as the basis for the letter, the Holy Father writes:

This was one of the final acts of the risen Lord before his Ascension. Jesus appeared to the assembled disciples, broke bread with them and opened their minds to the understanding of the sacred Scriptures.¹

This is a key insight that has informed the Church’s relationship to Scripture ever since. Every time we gather for Mass, we continue with this action:

1. the opening of our minds to understand the sacred text within the Eucharistic Liturgy,
2. where we also continue in the apostolic action of the breaking of bread.

The reason why Pope Francis wrote “He opened their minds”, was to announce that commencing with 2020, the 3rd Sunday of Ordinary Time – which is this Sunday – would be for the Universal Church “The Sunday of the Word of God”. It is in recognition of this direction from the Pope that we have before us an open Bible. Today in the Eucharist we give thanks to the Lord for the gift of biblical revelation.

In the letter the Pope goes on to articulate the interrelationship between the Risen Lord and the Written Word. Jesus by the guidance of the Holy Spirit has entrusted to the Church the 73 Books of Divine Revelation. As we are attentive to the reading, explaining and application of the Word of God in our lives, we are then able to share in the life of Jesus, more than two thousand years after he took on our human nature and dwelt amongst us.

There is a question I want to ask and answer. How is it that so long after the Lord moved into the neighbourhood of our world can “Knowledge of Scripture leads to knowledge of Christ”?

Think of the Bible as a great narrative, the unfolding of a story that developed over hundreds of years. Now because this story is so big, and complicated, it is not divided into just chapters but books. The books are not of equal lengths, but each is critical to the whole. Book 1 is Creation: Genesis 1-2; Book 2 is the Fall: Genesis 3-11; Book 3 is Israel: Genesis 12-Malachi 4. This is the

¹ http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20190930_aperuit-illis.html

biggest book; Book 4: The Gospel of Jesus Christ: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; Book Five: The Acts of the Apostles and the rest of the New Testament; Book six in which we are participating: is the post-apostolic Church, 80 AD – until the 2nd Coming of Jesus.²

Now here is the crucial point. What we are doing in Book 6 has to be in continuity with what happened in the earlier parts of the story. This is because any good story will have a natural development even though there will be plot twists along the way. To ensure that we aren't writing Book 6 so as to contradict the earlier parts of the plot, the Lord has given us editors who, so to speak help keep the story focused. These editors are the Popes, Bishops, theologians, biblical scholars, and ethicists of the Catholic Tradition who assist us, so we are living in a way that is an appropriate progression with what happened earlier in the story. At the same time, we are invited to keep before us book six is not the end of the story. I will say more about this in a minute.

So, with this before us, I want to think of two ways we keep focused so we are in continuity with how the first five books have developed. The first has to do with knowing the story; and the second with how we live in the present story, aware there is another story far greater still awaiting us.

In today's Gospel Jesus says something that helps us to recognise how important it is to know the biblical story. As he begins his ministry, he declares that the time is "fulfilled, and the kingdom of heaven has come near?" What does this mean? For something to be fulfilled means that it must have been foreshadowed somewhere else. What Jesus is therefore declaring is how in the Hebrew Scriptures there were repeated references to the messianic age, when the anointed one of God would arrive. When Jesus therefore says that time is fulfilled, he is declaring that in my appearance this part of the story finds its completion. Now by saying this Jesus implies that those who are listening to him, know the Story of which the Incarnation of the Son of God is the fulfillment.

This has an important application for us. We too are to know the story of Scripture. I am so pleased that Ascension Press has Fr Mike Schmitz reading through the Bible in a Year. This is a reading programme that I know many parishioners of St. Peter's are joining in every day. I want to encourage you to stick with it. The more you know the overarching story of Scripture the more you will see where all the pieces fit together. For those who want to check it out please go to (<https://ascensionpress.com/pages/biy-registration>). It's not too late to join us.

The more we know the scriptures the more we will know Jesus so that we can apply to our lives these words: "Repent and believe in the good news". I have said before that the verb repent has to do first with the mind, because this is what it means, "be transformed in your thinking," so we can believe in the good news. How is this kind of repentance realized? By knowing the story. So let me ask you. How well do you know the Bible? Are you wanting to know it better? St. Jerome was never satisfied with his knowledge of Scripture and always worked towards a deepening understanding. May we desire this same transformation. Why does this matter?

² I have adapted this schema from the New Testament scholar NT Wright who talks of a five part play.

You see, as this transformation happens, we will then be people who have a perspective on life like the one Paul describes in his letter when he writes: “The present form of the world is passing away”. Therefore, we are to live in relation to everything in this world, the things that make up our earthly life, like marriage, happiness and sorrow, our possessions, and vocations not as the things that matter most. Why is this? Well, it is because this world and the story in which we find ourselves in book 6 will come to an end, and then the new and even greater story will begin. Only those who know the Scripture can live with this kind of perspective.

And here is the final point, as we grow in knowing the story and the one who is at its centre, Jesus Christ, we are then called by Jesus to reach out to others, so they can come to know the story and its main character, and all the host of characters who make up Books 1-6. Therefore, we are invited to a life of evangelization, a word that means “Sharing the Good News.” Why is it Good News? This is the story that helps to make sense of each of our stories.

In conclusion let me state: This is a story that we had nothing to do in creating – that is the biblical narrative. However, we do have a part of play as it continues to unfold. May we pray that the Lord will open our minds and hearts to his word and discover how knowledge of scripture does lead to a deepening knowledge of Jesus Christ so we can live purposefully in Book 6 of the Greatest Story Ever Told.