

Epiphany IV Year A

“This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel....and a sword will piece your own soul too.”

Over the past year or so I have become acquainted with Mobile’s reading public via AL. com.... something of an oxymoron perhaps: “Mobile reading public”. I have been writing a column for the religion section of the so-called paper, or what’s left of it. After each column was published I have been taken to task by said readership.... Though I have also received compliments (mostly from you.... perhaps only from you)... the vast majority of responses have been angry and critical... several readers after my last column said I was going to hell... one person actually called me on the phone and told me so... I wanted to say: I’ll see you there!... The common complaint among the responses was that I was “rewriting God’s word.” So when it comes to scripture, at least in this part of the world, most people’s minds are already made up as to its meaning.... And that is sad because... where is the discovery, where is the life in that? How would we discover the golden thread running throughout the fabric of our sacred lore?

Today I want to talk about the means to approach scripture rightly, the means to approach scripture whereby it is set alive... Scripture was written to be interpreted: scripture the first word, not the last word... interpreted within context... the context within which scripture was written: social, cultural, historical and literary contexts; and within the context we as modern readers bring to scripture... our social, cultural contexts.... we bring new knowledge along with our histories to our own interpretation... and in every case of interpretation we bring our imaginations to scripture because that is the means by which scripture comes alive... According to Coleridge, it is not scripture that animates the imagination, but it is the imagination that animates scripture... without the human imagination scripture is one dimensional and lifeless; ossified in a world alien to us... fundamentalism that so pervades our culture calls for , “just the written word as is,” but there is no such thing... The irony is that a fundamentalist approach still relies on interpretation... it is just a matter of *whose* interpretation... and such a narrow approach, I would argue, robs scripture of its transforming and enlightening power.

In our contemporary society there are scholars, theologians, preachers, students of biblical literature who through anthropological and historical technological advances are offering great insight into scriptural interpretation... refuting in some cases long held beliefs of the church at

large as erroneous to the intentions of the gospels...while affirming others. The point is that scripture loses its revelatory power when it is forced into a prescribed formula in which it is rendered stale, warmed over and lifeless, and often, in our predominantly Calvinistic culture... punitive.

It is my personal belief that scripture has much to offer us still, and much to offer with intellectual integrity... that it teems with new insight... that it is rife with discovery... that it will stand with integrity among the burning questions of our world... that its ambiguity is part of its genius.... We don't approach scripture with certainty... but with our questions and doubts and expectation and passionate desire to know... using our minds and acquired knowledge, and our innate desire to discover the truth of God in relation to humankind... God's relationship with humankind remains an open question... a question we are born to ask... thank God! And Surely God is still revealing Godself; and surely we are learning still about ourselves.... Else we have made an idol of the spiritual and religious life...and idols are false and lifeless.

Today's passage is certainly no exception; it serves as a prime example... It begs for interpretation, it begs for relevance in our own day... It begs to be more than a quaint story, more than a platitude... The writing of scripture is itself a process of interpretation... the gospel writers are offering their interpretations as to the theology of who this Jesus is... the meaning of his life and ministry... In the early church, we now know that there were many varying points of view; theology was polyphonic... the points of view we now have in the canon of scripture just happened to have been the ones deemed by the church fathers as, shall we say, Kosher.

On the surface this story in Luke's gospel is the first affirmation of Jesus being the messiah of God... His ministry begins in the Temple and emanates out into the world... Jesus is the fulfillment of scripture... the new way ahead... the embodiment of Torah for the 1st century world... most interpretations stop there... Jesus is the messiah, the son of God, leave it at that... but what have we said?... there is much more here, more than words. First of all there's the word messiah which needs context. Messiah means the anointed of God...in particular, the one to deliver Israel from its enemies.... There have been many messiahs, anointed ones, sons of God throughout Israel's biblical history... Jesus is just the latest manifestation of this typology for Luke, the one to deliver Israel from the indignity and horror of Roman oppression.... And there is a twist here in this brief passage if we sift through the lines... Luke tells us that Jesus is presented in the Temple according to Mosaic law.... But that requirement only applies to boys at the circumcision... this is the presentation of Mary in the Temple...

Women according to Mosaic law were to be purified after the birth of a child, so Luke is playing a little fast and loose with Leviticus and Exodus here.... So why?.... Well, let's look at this Gospel as a literary whole... The center piece of the prologue of this Gospel is Mary's song of revolution... the corrupt rich overthrown and the poor raised up, and as good Aristotelians, you know that the prologue in ancient rhetoric governs the entire narrative... so here is Mary again, and at the climax of Simeon's prophecy, we are told that Mary's soul will be pierced along with the piercing of her son's body... In short Mary is as much protagonist here as Jesus. Indeed we see manifestations of Mary in the other women of faith throughout this gospel... Anna another such woman in our passage today.

If we look we begin to see the richness of this passage... recognizing that in all passages of scripture we are being taught as to the nature and meaning of our humanity.... Jesus is the archetype of the true human... the one who lives for a compassionate and just world in the face of the world's evil...the one who bears salvation, that is, well-being to the lost and the least among us. In fundamentalist theology salvation has to do with the individual only... but that is a far cry from what Luke has in mind... Luke is speaking of the remaking of our world and our role in that remaking...Jesus the very way of God in earth...and Mary, Mary the consummate symbol of faith.... she the ancient mother is the bearer of the life meant for our world.... In her giving birth she offers, presents to the world a new way of life.... And the bittersweet reality of this passage is that bearing God's saving life to the world comes at great cost...that to bear salvation, as a mother bears her child to the world, there is the piercing of one's soul, and there is loss... sorry! But to bear God's life is loss... but the gain dear people of God is beyond all imagining... mothers are the bearers of such knowledge... that is what Jesus means I think when he says that in order to gain one's life one must lose it... This life of faith into which we are called will take all that we can give... as a mother gives her life in birth.... And the promise brothers and sisters is true joy, true joy....We spend so much time in our culture in the proverbial pursuit of happiness... but there is only one thing that will bring joy, and that is to see to the good, see to the well-being, see to the very salvation of our neighbor.... The imaginative echoes of scripture tell us so, again and again, in our collective imagination over the ages.... To serve our neighbor, bearing God's life to the world, as a mother bears her child, is the only thing in this short life, the piercing of our souls and our losses notwithstanding... It is the only thing...