

Proper 14 Year B 2018

So we are now almost three quarters of the year through year B of the lectionary.... The year of Mark principally, but for the past three weeks, and for two more weeks the lectionary gurus have us reading from the Gospel of John. As I've said before, the Gospels offer different points of view as to the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Mark is the earliest of the four Gospels; Matthew and Luke clearly follow Mark in their narratives, but not without some editorial changes... deletions; additions. The stories of the Good Samaritan, and the walk to Emmaus, for example, only appear in Luke. None of the Synoptic writers, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all Jewish scribes, would dare to argue that Jesus is one and the same as God. And yet, in the later Gospel of John, the writers make that very claim. So the Gospels in the bible don't offer a definitive picture of who Jesus was, rather, they offer imaginative theological speculation for our consideration. Belief, therefore, is provisional, evolving, open to interpretation. And just so you know, while we're at it: we say there are four Gospels in the New Testament; and indeed that's true, but we now know that there were many more gospels written during the time of Jesus, the first century of the Common Era. There are, for example, some sixty known gospels which were discovered at Qumran, just east of Jerusalem in the Judean desert; called the Dead Sea scrolls. In 1947 the Nag Hammadi Library was discovered in Egypt which contained some forty gospels written during the first four centuries of early Christianity. So early Christianity had many voices; many points of view. During the first four centuries of the Common Era, in a very

complicated process of what we call canonization, the church fathers decided which books of the Old and New Testaments were in... and which were out. By the end of the sixth century what we now know as the Bible had been decided on mostly, but even today there are subtle disagreements over the authority of some of the books of the Bible. The NRSV, New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the translation we use, includes the so-called Apocrypha alongside the Torah and the Prophets and the Writings, the so-called Old Testament. The NRSV therefore considers the apocryphal books authoritative... But the Oxford English Bible translators place the Apocrypha in the back of the book, behind the New Testament, signaling their ascribing to the Apocrypha less authority... a curious supplement perhaps. Because we use the NRSV in the Episcopal Church, we read from the Apocrypha in our lectionary cycle, from the Song of Songs, from Ecclesiasticus, and others.

So all of this digression to make the point that in scripture there is no singular way to believe, no definitive authority per se... we only have points of view; some in agreement, some quite contradictory... points of view that form a multifaceted tapestry... a tapestry that is culturally influenced, and contextualized. Ultimately our faith belongs to mystery... but my premise is that we have ways into the mystery, that mystery can be experienced, felt. At its best scripture gives us enough information with which to speculate as to the person of Jesus, his life and ministry, and their meaning and

purpose. And our task is to interpret using all the knowledge and experience we have... seeking what God is saying to us in our own location and context.

But what I haven't said, is that there are some overarching themes common to all four Gospels. These Gospels like all the others, are snapshots onto the conversations concerning the nature of God in a certain time and place. And one conversation, I think stands out, and is of profound importance: Not unlike ancient religions all over the world, the chief ritual practice of Judaism from which Christianity came, was sacrifice, specifically the sacrifice of animals, and in more ancient times, humans. Many scholars think that the story of Abraham's intended sacrifice of his son Isaac was a tale told as a prohibition against child sacrifice. At the establishment of the Temple cult, the chief function of the temple priests was the sacrifice of animals. You'll remember the story of Jesus clearing the animal vendors out of the Temple during the Passover festival. Pilgrims would purchase the animals and have the priest sacrifice them to God on the Temple altar. That practice was founded on the ancient theology of appeasement. That is to say, that God's goodness and favor depended upon God's people offering things to God valuable to them. Giving up, as it were, a portion of their livelihood. It reflected a relationship that was fearful and contentious. That practice was not without challenge throughout Israel's biblical history. The prophets challenged the practice, and argued that true sacrifice was the love of neighbor, following the way of Torah. Jesus's theology represented a shift in the age-old theology of animal sacrifice in that he followed the

ethos of the prophets, turning the Temple theology of appeasement on its head. His theology was one without fear. Sacrifice for Jesus was not the means to placate an all-powerful, judging God. Sacrifice for Jesus was love of neighbor, in particular, the ones left out. In other words, our energy flows from the heart, made in the image of God's very own heart, to love of neighbor.... Jesus will tell his disciples that the way to Love God is in fact to Love one's neighbor. It's a theological reversal, if you will. We don't give to God what is already God's... we share God's Love and life with the world. Sacrifice is for the world God loves. God's very life is sacrifice; and we are here on this earth to live God's life.

The doctrine of substitutionary atonement, that God required the death of God's son to pay the debt for human sinfulness, is from the old and worn-out and violent paradigm of animal sacrifice; and it is still lurking within the institutional church. Sisters and brothers, God so loves the world that he gave his son to show us the way to love. And the principal means of sacrifice is distributive justice... sharing our well-being with others; and in the Gospels, such sharing becomes exponential. Justice raises all boats. In the presence of justice, all share in God's abundance.

For the last three weeks in John's gospel we have been hearing about bread. It is a metaphor for sacrifice. If you've ever baked bread, you get it. My mother, bless her failing mind; my mother said that the reason people always gather in the kitchen at

dinner parties is that it is the place of transformation. Sacrifice transforms. Sacrifice creates. Sacrifice shapes the universe.

We began our readings in John with the feeding of the five thousand... and then last week Jesus explains to his disciples, in a debriefing from the so-called miraculous feeding, that he is the living bread come down from heaven... and today Jesus takes it a step further and says to his followers that the bread come down from heaven is his flesh.... He'll go on to say (next week) that unless you eat his flesh and drink his blood, then you will not have life... we are told that this teaching is disturbing to his followers... some even leave in disgust, literalists most likely.... So what do we make of this speculation as to the person of Jesus according to this myth-making, mystic writer? We of course don't take it literally.... It is mythological speculation.

Recognizing that John is all about theology, Christology, in particular, what do we make of this disturbing metaphor, the eating of flesh and blood.... There is an ancient fable told by Plato, undoubtedly known to the scribe, or scribes we call John, that says that our flesh is our labor and our blood is our life. And remember the operative phrase in this gospel, that we are sent as Jesus is sent. That phrase I would argue governs John's theology.... It is our life and labor that is required of us. It is our life and labor that is to be nurture for our world. We, brothers and sisters are to be eaten and drunk for the world's sake... perhaps a disturbing metaphor, but the point is that God requires all that we have and all that we are for God's purposes; that our sacrifice for the Good knows

no bounds; it is personal, intimate, as intimate as flesh and blood. Our spiritual life, good people, is not a hobby, nor an extra-curricular activity; our church affiliation is not merely an entry for our obituaries. Our lives belong to God, and that requires our offering ourselves as living sacrifices for the world's sake. This is a gospel about Love, and the means of Love is sacrifice, offering ourselves for the good of the whole... The writers call it befriending, a rich word in the Greek. When all of our illusions, material and otherwise fail us... and they surely will... what is left are our bodies and blood... and that we must give away as well. God does not want a part of us. God wants all of us.

As I've told you before this gospel almost wasn't included in the finalized canon of scripture... some scholars say because it smacked of Docetism, that is, it placed far too much emphasis on the divinity of Jesus, and far too little on his humanity. Other scholars opine that this gospel was considered gnostic, that is, it served a community that was secretive and exclusive... but I think what may have been troubling about this gospel is its unequivocal demand for responsibility. We are our brothers' and sisters' keeper. As followers of Jesus we are bread come down from heaven, sent as Jesus is sent. And the bread, nurture for the world is our flesh... blessed broken and given.... That is what Love looks like good people. We are called to Love; and Love, our very heart's desire, an irony perhaps that we would resist it or withhold it... Love, our hearts desire, requires sacrifice... pray for courage good people, because it takes courage to Love. It takes courage to be blessed, broken, and given.