

Sunday Homily

LAST SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY /BIBLE SUNDAY

25 OCTOBER 2020

YEAR A

“Heaven and earth will pass away,
but my words will not pass away.”

Matthew 24:35

Illustration

At the end of World War II downtown Warsaw was almost totally levelled. Only one skeletal structure remained on the main street, and many devout Poles regarded it like a shrine. It was the Bible Society HQ and the words carved in its only remaining wall were clearly legible from the street: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”

Mark Twain said, “It’s not the parts of the Bible I don’t understand that cause me trouble, but the parts that I do!”

Gospel Teaching

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that until heaven and earth passed away the law would remain (Matthew 5:18). In today’s passage he says his own words will outlast even heaven and earth. The law will pass away with the rest of creation, but Jesus’ own words will remain. It’s the sort of staggering claim that makes us ask whether Jesus is mad, manipulative, or telling the truth. And if it’s true, then we must fall at his feet, learn from his teaching and follow his way.

Today is Bible Sunday and I have two questions: How do Jesus’ words sit within the rest of the Bible? And can we trust that our Bibles really contain his words?

How do Jesus’ words sit within the whole Bible? Although he made staggering claims for his own words, Jesus held the Old Testament in the highest regard. These sacred books were Jesus’ scriptures. He revered them; he lived by them; he taught from them; he regarded them as God’s word. But Jesus also interpreted these scriptures. He fulfilled the prophets and reshaped the law. This doesn’t mean the Old Testament is redundant – far from it – but for Christians it must be read through the lens of Christ and his teaching.

How about the New Testament? These books comprise authoritative insights on Jesus and his teaching, written by some of his earliest followers. We believe they’re inspired by the Holy Spirit and, along with the rest of the Bible, seal up in a written message all we need to know about God’s will for our lives. Notice then: Jesus is the centre. The Old Testament flows to him and the New Testament flows from him. Jesus’ words interpret the old and they inspire the new.

But were Jesus' words preserved and transmitted reliably? Over the last fifty years, an enormous amount of scholarly work has shown how accurately people in non-book cultures preserve precious teachings through memory and repetition. But Jesus' disciples would also have made written notes, which were also used in the writing of the Gospels.

There are those who, according to their own criteria, claim that most of what Jesus says in the Gospels can't really be trusted to have come from him. But a recent book (*Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Richard Bauckham, 2006) by the former Professor of New Testament in St Andrews, Scotland, argues in depth that all four Gospels are closely based on eyewitness testimony. If that's true, we have even better reason to trust the reliability of the text.

Application

So what happens when you read the words of Jesus trustingly? Usually they speak to our hearts and lives: we want to pray; we feel called to live by these words. And we find that, as we pray, the one we're meeting in prayer is the same person we encounter on the Bible's written page. The Holy Spirit has brought Jesus to us by inspiring the original writers and brought us to Jesus as we seek him in prayer.

Reading the whole Bible trustingly – with Jesus at the centre – praying from it, and applying it, really is essential to Christian living. It's how we come to know Jesus better, and how we allow Jesus' words to permeate our souls. As St Paul said, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly."

Jesus' words were remembered because his hearers were struck by a truth they could trust. They wrote down the words of today's Gospel reading because in their own generation they saw Jerusalem destroyed and realised this was the beginning of the passing of heaven and earth, just as Jesus said. The process may take longer than any of us think, but Jesus' words stand at the heart of the Bible and in the midst of a changing, crumbling cosmos. With majesty and grace they interpret both scripture and world. Read them! Pay attention to them! Let them comfort you when you're disturbed, and disturb you when you're comfortable!