

SAINT JOSEPH CHURCH + YORKVILLE

July 14, 2024

Newsletter no. 226

During the past few weeks, in our ongoing series of short essays on the Bible, we have discussed the actual writing of the books of the Old and New Testaments (OT/NT), the languages in which the Bible was written, the notion of inspiration, and the reception of the OT and the NT—in other words, by what sort of process the books of the OT and the NT were recognized as sacred texts by the Jewish and Christian communities. In this newsletter I would like to devote a little space to the interpretation of the Bible.

We can begin with a question: Why does the Bible need to be interpreted? Why not just take it exactly as it is written—at face value, so to speak, as fundamentalist Christians tend to do? However, there are parts of the Bible, especially in the OT and particularly in the writings of the prophets, that cannot be easily understood or are even incomprehensible if taken literally—that is, according to the letter—and that require explanation. And there are other parts, especially in the OT, that seem to contradict scientific facts that most people acknowledge. For example, did God really create the world in six days, twenty-four hours each?

Even before the coming of Christ and the composition of the NT, many educated Jews came to realize that there were portions of the OT that did not make sense or that even seemed immoral if they were understood literally, and so they began to search for a meaning that underlay the literal meaning. Thus was born the idea that the Bible was a text with two meanings. Some parts of the Bible could be understood exactly as they were written; those parts had a literal meaning. Other parts could not be easily understood exactly as they were written, but they concealed a deeper spiritual meaning that had to be uncovered. There were some parts of the Bible, though, that allowed for two meanings—a literal one and a spiritual one—simultaneously; in such cases the literal meaning came first and the spiritual meaning followed from it, but there was never a case in which the spiritual meaning came first and the literal meaning followed from it.

The earliest Christian writers inherited this twofold way of interpreting the Bible from the Jews. Even as early as the NT, the OT was beginning to be interpreted in a spiritual way for Christians. This we can see in Galatians 4:22-25, where St. Paul says that Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, had two sons from two different women—one a free woman and the other a slave. The story in Genesis 16-18, 21 about Abraham and these two women and their sons, which St. Paul is referring to, is to be taken literally, because these people really existed and really did what they are said to have done. But the two women also have a spiritual meaning, which St. Paul explains: the slave woman symbolizes the Jewish people, who are in slavery to the Old Law of Moses, while the free woman symbolizes Christian freedom from the Law. This is the most ancient Christian spiritual interpretation of the OT, and over the next twenty centuries it was followed by innumerable others.

How to interpret certain difficult parts of the OT that seemed to condone immoral acts like murder and lying and prostitution or seemed to command something improper? At the end of the fourth century St. Augustine set out the rule that governed how such passages were to be treated: if a passage of Scripture seemed to condone something immoral or to command something improper, it was to be interpreted spiritually; on the other hand, if a passage fostered morality and enjoined what was good, it was to be interpreted literally. The guiding principle, according to Augustine, was love of God and neighbor: whatever conformed to that love was to be understood literally, and whatever did not was to be interpreted spiritually. Some theologians have said that the possibility of interpreting it in a spiritual way prevented the OT from being abandoned by the Church in the first few centuries of its existence, when there were heated debates about such matters as the brutal warfare conducted by the Israelites against their enemies, the polygamy of the patriarchs, and the fact that clever lies were often praised. The realization that these things did not need to be taken literally but could be interpreted spiritually helped to preserve the OT for Christian use.

There will be more on biblical interpretation in the following newsletter.

Please welcome Deacon Robert Hornacek, from Green Bay, Wisconsin, who will be speaking at all the Masses next weekend on behalf of Food for the Poor.

Father Boniface

Mass intentions for the period from July 13th to 21st

Saturday-Sunday, July 13th-14th

4:00 pm: In Thanksgiving to St. Joseph
8:00 am: Virginia Taylor (D)
10:00 am: Mitzi and Bernhard Purk (D)
12:00 noon: Robert Camaj and Family (L)
2:00 pm (Hungarian): Deceased Members of the Steiger Family
6:00 pm: St. Joseph's Parishioners

Monday, July 15th

7:00 am:
12:15 pm: Keane Family (L&D)

Tuesday, July 16th

7:00 am:
12:15 pm: Ilona, Helen and Elio Parroni (L)

Wednesday, July 17th

7:00 am:
12:15 pm: Vicky Thacke (D)

Thursday, July 18th

7:00 am:
12:15 pm: Emma Dulmovits (D)

Friday, July 19th

7:00 am:
12:15 pm: Tom Harmon (D)

Saturday, July 20th

8:00 am:
12:15 pm:
4:00 pm: Dorothea Slapikas (D)

Sunday, July 21st

8:00 am: Benito Fernando Murillo (D)
10:00 am: Patrick Keller (D)
12:00 noon: Anne Magelinski (D)
2:00 pm (Hungarian): Deceased Members of the Geosits Family
6:00 pm: St. Joseph's Parishioners