

The Agenda of Jesus

29th Sunday
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During these very days the Catholic Church is holding a Synod of Bishops in Rome to discuss the role of the word of scripture in the life and ministry of the Church. They are asking how scripture might have the place in our liturgies and in our lives that the Second Vatican council proclaimed the word of scripture must have if we are to be a renewed Christian people. So the question is, "Does scripture have power in our lives as Christians?" The shocking quote from St Jerome from sixteen hundred years ago has been proposed as the motto for this Synod on the Word. It brings us up short: "Ignorance of scripture is ignorance of Christ." As St. Paul says today in the earliest paragraph of the entire New Testament: "Our gospel did not come to you in word alone, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit with much conviction." Today let us give the gospel the power, the spirit, and the conviction it deserves.

It is not easy to let the gospel have the power it is meant to have, to let the real power of Jesus of Nazareth come through. Here's why. There is a famous ironic statement: "God made us in his image... and we returned the favor!" That is, rather than let God be God as God is and reveals himself, we have created God in our own image, fashioned God in a way that is much more comfortable and suited to what we want God to be. We have done the same thing with Jesus of Nazareth, not allowed him to be as he is revealed in scripture, but shaped him to our image, tailored him snugly to fit our dimensions and our desires.

For me the challenge goes like this, first about God and then about Jesus:

1. It is very easy for me to believe that God exists.
2. It is harder for me to believe that God is the mysterious, powerful, compassionate God he shows himself to be in scripture.
3. It is hardest of all for me to believe that this God is active in this world, doing something only God can do here and now, here and now in us and in me.

I'd much rather just fall back on believing God exists; leave it at that, because that God created in my image would make no demands on me.

So too with Jesus of Nazareth my challenge goes like the following:

1. I find it a piece of cake to believe Jesus of Nazareth was the greatest teacher of all times and a great miracle worker and that his works and deeds in scripture should be treasured.

2. It is somewhat harder for me to believe as the Church teaches that Jesus of Nazareth was and is the Son of God, both God and Man, crucified, risen, and present today in the Spirit.
3. What is really, really hard for me to believe, to let in, to allow to be, to let have its power in me is that Jesus of Nazareth will actually bring about what he was and is all about!

What I stumble over is giving to the agenda of Jesus the power and the conviction he gave to it and wants me and us to give to it. What was and is this agenda of Jesus?

It comes through in the gospel today about “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, but give to God what is God’s.” We so misunderstand this passage, cut it as cloth to fit what we want, as if it had anything at all to do with having one realm for politics and as citizens and another for religion and devotion. Absolutely not; it’s not about that at all; that takes all the power, spirit, and conviction from the gospel and from Jesus himself.

To restore its power we must first recognize that this passage is not from a three-ring, loose-leaf binder from which you can just remove the page where it is located. The context is dramatic, confrontational, climactic. Jesus has at last entered Jerusalem riding in as a royal Messiah. He has gone to lay claim to the temple by a dramatic and shocking action to clean it of its compromise, and to manifest an authority by which he claims that he replaces that temple as the place and person where and through whom God is present and acts. He at last has brought his charge against the priests and the elders saying they are “yes, yes men” but do not obey God; that they are the tenants who have killed the prophets and will kill the son and from whose hands God will rescue his beloved vineyard. The die has been cast. This is hardly a time for a tepid term paper on paying taxes, or being citizens on one hand and on the other praying and being devoted to God. Far too tame: no power, no spirit, no conviction, not the real hard-to-believe-in-Jesus-with-an-agenda. Ignorance of what this scripture is really saying is ignorance of who Jesus really is and what he is about.

Here’s what it’s really about. The Pharisees and Herodians are trying to trap Jesus so they can do away with him now that he has joined battle with them and has become in-your-face with them. When they ask him about paying the census tax to Caesar, to the occupying Romans, he forces them to show their cards first. “Do you have the coin?” They pull one out of their purses. The coin carried by these religious Jews is itself a blasphemous, idolatrous thing to be carrying because it has on it an image of the Emperor Tiberius with the blasphemous inscription “Tiberius Caesar son of the divine Augustus.” He has forced them to show their cards first. They are compromisers. His “give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s” is not about citizenship or paying taxes or politics. Equivalently he is saying, “If the blasphemous coin is Caesar’s, then pay the blasphemer back in kind! If it belongs to him then give him what he deserves!” To pay back a blasphemer in kind and give a blasphemer what he deserves is not about paying taxes but more like “Throw the coin back to Caesar; why would you, above all, have anything to do with one who

affronts everything that you stand for?” That’s more the import than what we have made it to be and that’s more the real Jesus than the one we’d prefer. There’s power, spirit, and conviction! “Ignorance of scripture is ignorance of Christ.” Jesus’ agenda is about God’s sovereignty, God’s kingdom, God who overcomes any blasphemous emperor. Jesus casts himself not only against the Jewish elders but against the blasphemous Roman emperor with whom they are colluding.

Then the other half of this untame couplet: “Give to God what belongs to God.” In its context in scripture after the dramatic, symbolic act in the temple and Jesus’ in-your-face confrontation of the elders, this is not about giving to God in the sense of piety or devotion. Rather, it’s a different kind of commitment. “Give to God what belongs to God” means:

“Give to God the power and the sovereignty that belongs to God, let God bring about God’s kingdom, be part of his kingdom movement. Don’t go thinking you are going to overthrow the Romans, for that’s accepting them on their blasphemous terms of power; rather join in God’s establishing his kingdom on earth, which you already find happening in me and which I showed you clearly in my symbolic action of overturning the temple. God is now doing what God had always told you he would do and he is doing it in me; commit yourself to God acting in me. That’s what belongs to God, give that to God. This action of God bringing about his kingdom, his sovereignty, is what I, Jesus of Nazareth, am all about, this is my agenda. Now, can you believe in this agenda that God in me has begun and can you believe that he will bring about what I am all about?”

This is the real Jesus that a fuller understanding of scripture makes known to us, confronts us with, asks us to believe in, leaves us in front of to choose how we shall live as Christians. Indeed, St. Jerome was right, “Ignorance of scripture is ignorance of Christ,” for as Paul knew the gospel is not just word but is also power, spirit, and conviction. May we and our church, as it deliberates on the word of scripture in our liturgy and life, also find this power, spirit, and conviction in Jesus the Word and be renewed as a Christian people by him.