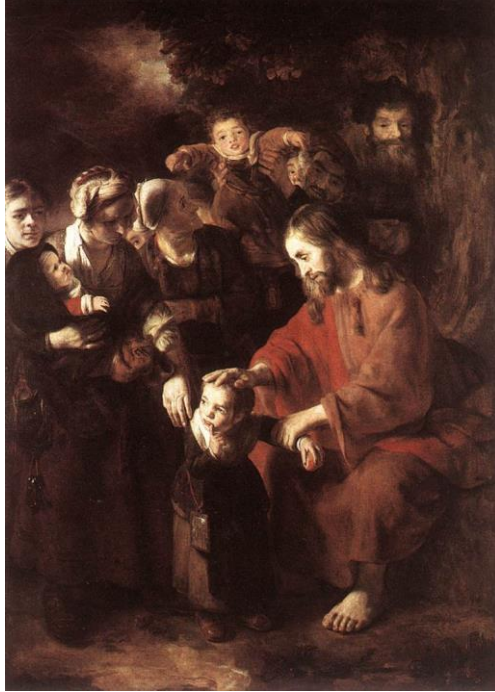


Interpreting Scripture



Mark 9:43 "(And Jesus said), 'if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell . . . And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where the worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'"

In 1952, Flannery O'Connor, the beloved Southern Roman Catholic writer, published her first novel, entitled "Wise Blood," which the celebrated director John Huston made into a major motion picture in 1979. In the story, there is a blind

evangelical preacher named Asa Hawks who, before a dazzled audience at a large tent revival, is said to have purposely thrown lime into his own eyes to blind himself because his eyes had caused him to sin. He had courageously done what Jesus in today's Gospel commands us to do, and because of it he attracted huge crowds as an itinerant preacher traveling from town to town, with his daughter as his only comfort. By the conclusion of the story, however, the reader discovers that Asa had promised the public to blind himself at a tent revival, but then could not go through with it, though he pretended as if he had. So in the end, not only could Asa Hawks see, but he was a huckster who was simply preying upon those who believed.

Nonetheless, today's Gospel is a tough reading and doesn't show up on too many people's list of favorite Bible passages. It's all a bit too grotesque commending self-mutilation in a way that doesn't sound at all like the loving and merciful God we are used to. What I *like* about this passage, is that it helps us to define our boundaries of Biblical interpretation. For none of my conservative Biblical friends back in college were ever walking around with eye patches or bandaged stumps because they have literally followed Jesus' command in today's reading. So, if they didn't take this passage literally, I asked, how did they interpret it? On what grounds did they ignore a plain reading of the text? Now most of those friends declared that

this passage is a simple example of Middle Eastern hyperbole, and as such it is not meant to be taken literally. - - - And there's the rub! For who determines whether something is hyperbole, or not, I asked? And on what grounds is that determination made? And there were no easy answers here.

Is the flood and Noah's ark hyperbole, I asked? Are the tumbling walls of Jericho hyperbolic? How about the Virgin Birth, or the Resurrection? How are we to understand the Bible? What are the boundaries of our Biblical interpretation? At one extreme end, are the people who argue that God's Word is indeed to be understood literally, simply as it is written; while at the other end are those who are equally adamant that we must interpret Scripture based on our current knowledge and on our real-life experiences of God in our midst. But both sides are ultimately unsatisfying to me in the end because they don't really answer the question that if you don't read the text literally, then how do you interpret it?

Literalists are indeed often accused of picking and choosing the passages to which they want to apply their literal interpretations, while ignoring verses like those in today's Gospel, or those passages in the Bible that declare that the world was created in seven days (Gen. 1) or that there are literally four corners to the earth (Isaiah 11.12, Revelation 7.1 or 20.8)). But we all do the exact same thing. We all ignore

the passages that we don't like and stress the ones we do! There seem to be no rules of interpretation acceptable by all.

In the sixteenth century, for example, the new Calvinist Protestants in the Netherlands decided to ignore the clear biblical and historic prohibition among Christians against the charging of interest in the lending of money, called usury, strictly forbidden in Exodus 22:25. Usury is the fundamental principle upon which our capitalist society is now based. So, most of us ignore that ancient and clear biblical prohibition. In the eighteenth century, Americans fighting to overthrow the rule of King George in this country discounted the long biblical and historic tradition of the Divine Right of Kings (Romans 13.1) and thus we created a democratic state instead. In the nineteenth century, there was an active debate among Christians about the long biblical and historic acceptance of slavery in the Bible, where at one point Moses acknowledges that a slave owner can beat this slave to death with a rod, as long as the slave survives a day or two (Exodus 21.21), but the Abolitionists just ignored the numerous biblical passages regulating the administration of slavery in our Scriptures. In the twentieth century, Christians have overcome previous concerns first about polygamy and concubinage, and more recently about divorce and remarriage (Matthew 5.23), and even more recently about sexual orientation (Genesis 2.18). So how are we

to understand Biblical interpretation with a history like that? Do we all just get to pick and choose what we like, and ignore what we don't, while declaring that we've got it right?

In today's Gospel, for example, the disciples wanted to see themselves as the sole distributors of Jesus and his message. "John said to Jesus, 'Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him because he was not following us.' But Jesus said, 'Do not forbid him. . . For he that is not against us is for us.'" The idea that someone else was succeeding in their field of work was very painful for the disciples, especially when understood in its context. For just earlier in that chapter, Mark told of an anxious father that went to Jesus saying: "I asked your disciples to cast the spirit out, but they were unable." So now, the disciples, peeved at being unsuccessful exorcists themselves, see an outsider successfully driving out a devil in Jesus' name and they are jealous that this man is succeeding where they failed. And they hope that Jesus would refuse to recognize him, would even condemn him. It is as if their own self-righteousness would be reinforced if the outsider was rejected. We so often build ourselves up, by putting the other side down, by dividing the world into "us" and "them." That's what's going on here. But Jesus is not threatened by differences outside his own circle. He refuses to box in God's ability to be present in others, and

he invites his fragile, insecure disciples to go deeper, to seek to recognize God's actions no matter where they are to be found.

In the Old Testament, Moses encounters the same problem among the Israelites in Exodus when "a young man ran and told Moses, 'Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.' And Joshua, son of Nun, said, 'My lord Moses, stop them!' But Moses said to him, 'Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them (all)!'"

And perhaps God has. Christians often talk about how we are all God's children and then we end up treating some of those children like foster kids, as though they are not really one of us, as if they were orphans. We do this whenever we talk about how the Body of Christ is a community of the faithful but refuse to let anyone else be counted amongst our number, unless they think and act the same as we do, unless they understand the Scriptures exactly as we do! Visitors to church notice these things. They stumble over them. Some will even tell you it is why they have lost interest in the Church or organized religion. They can't see any difference between the people inside the church and the people outside, except that the people inside pretend to be any better than they are, and insist they have got it right!

So how are we in the end to interpret God's Word? The literalist interpretation is the easiest to explain, but the hardest to live with. So, most of us, including most of my literalist friends, simply pick and choose the passages that are important to them. Can't we admit that we all do that? And also realize that our choices say more about us as they do about God. Our interpretations reveal who we were in ages past, who we are today, and who we aspire to be in the future. But God remains unchanged.

And if our interpretation of God's Word is meant to prove us right and others wrong, then we will be jealous of those who seem to have a different view on God's truth. But Jesus reminds us, if we can get out of our own way, if we can recognize that none of us alone owns the market on God's truth, that all of us are struggling to understand God ourselves, and our Scriptures, and that each of us has a valuable piece that needs to be joined with all the valuable pieces of others, and that only by joining them all together can we truly become the Body of Christ that marvels and rejoices in the many ways that God's moves amongst us, and who surpasses all our human understanding! AMEN.