

Sunday 14

When we read the Scriptures each Sunday, we only read a little bit, a snippet, you might say, from a fuller text, say, a book of the Old Testament or a letter of Paul and then a Gospel. As you know, the first reading is always a reading from the Old Testament, that is, the Jewish scriptures, except during the Easter season when we read instead from the Acts of the Apostles, which is a history of the earliest days of the church. Then the second reading is taken from the New Testament and can be any part of it except the four Gospels which are saved to be the material for the third or last reading.

Since we read just a part of these works, it is always good to try to put these parts back into their fuller context. Otherwise we really don't know what is being talked about. For instance, our first reading today is from the Book of Isaiah and it talks about rejoicing with Jerusalem and uses the image of a woman breast-feeding her baby. Now what is that all about? Why should we rejoice with Jerusalem? And who is the mother feeding her baby? Scripture scholars tell us that this part of the Book of Isaiah is describing what is happening to the Jews in the sixth century before Christ. The Babylonians had destroyed the city and temple

of Jerusalem in the 580s and deported most of the population, bringing them as slaves to Babylonia. Now, some fifty years later, the Persian kings are allowing the Jews to return to their city. And so it is the city Jerusalem which is about to receive its population back from exile and is therefore rejoicing like a mother feeding her baby. The people, we are told, will be carried back to the city like nurslings carried in their mothers' arms and fondled on their mothers' laps.

To understand the second reading today from Paul's Letter to the Galatians, it helps to know that he is fighting against other Christians in the community at Galatia who claim that Gentiles who become Christians have to observe all the Jewish laws. Against them Paul insists that it is enough for him--and for any Christian!--to bear the marks of Jesus on his body. Although he as a Jew had been circumcised at birth, that fact no longer had any meaning for him. And that is also true, he argues, for Gentiles entering the church. They don't need to be circumcised.

When we look at today's Gospel, we find Jesus sending out seventy-two of his disciples to different towns and villages which he will later visit. This is from chapter 10 of Luke. In the previous chapter Jesus sends out twelve disciples. What do these different

numbers represent? The commentator Reginald Fuller tells us that the mission of the twelve represents the church's mission to Israel, to its twelve tribes, while the mission of the seventy represents the church's mission to the world because the world, according to Jewish tradition, contained seventy-two nations. Some commentators even claim that perhaps the Lord did not send out his disciples on such missions during his life-time and that this is all a retrojection (a pushing back, a throwing back) of the risen Lord's action into his pre-resurrection life. But others reject this and claim that even during his life Jesus sent out his disciples to preach that the Kingdom of God had come.

So it helps to understand the larger contexts of our readings. True, at times we can understand to some degree the readings even without knowing their larger contexts. Nevertheless, I don't think anyone would deny the fact that knowing the larger context enhances our understanding of them. And there is a larger issue involved here. For centuries the Church and everyone else read the bible and all other books without knowing or seeking to know their larger contexts. Then in the 18th century people began to realize how important it was to put a text or a book into its historical context. And so scholars began to ask questions like: Who wrote this book, and where and when, and to whom? And then scholars

began to apply this new historical approach to the Bible itself. The church did not like this. For example, it had always insisted that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible. Now scholars using an historical approach realized that that could not be true. The books were produced at different times and places and could not be the work of one man. The Church fought this new kind of scholarship until it was impossible to do so any longer. That took about a hundred years.

Is there a lesson here for us as individual believers and as a church? It seems to me that the lesson for us as individual believers is to realize that our lives change and we must be open to the Holy Spirit speaking to us in new situations. Yes, we respond with the same faith, but the application of our faith to this new situation will be--or ought to be--a different application than the one we gave to a past situation. We are not the same person at 70 that we were at forty. And the world of today is a different world than the world of forty years ago. Indeed our understanding of our faith itself, and not simply its application, may be different today. New wine in new wine skins!

And the lesson for us as the church? Today the application of this historical consciousness is being challenged by some Catholics.

They want to claim that Vatican II did not change anything in the church. Vatican II simply continued on the same path which the Church had always trod. Thus they argue for what they call an interpretation of continuity of the council. But what some of them may really want is to return things to what they were before Vatican II, and this is their way of doing it. I do not agree. Vatican II changed much in the Church. The change in the liturgy, the recognition of the laity as being the church, the people of God, the recognition of collegiality, that is, the sharing of the bishops with the pope in the governance of the church, and the acceptance of the separation of church and state as something good—all these were changes, and we do not want to lose them by insisting that “nothing happened” at Vatican II. Indeed, we want to implement them because that has not yet been done to the full. But we also recognize that we cannot freeze that moment in church history. There will be other councils and there will be new changes because we and the church are part of history, and history means change. To deny that is to refuse to recognize what is most real, that the Holy Spirit speaks anew to us each day and to each new generation.