

## **De Te Loquitur - It's Talking about You Today**

3 Marks of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church - Founded on the Word

Nehemiah 4:14-21, 31-32

Luke 4:14-22, 31-32

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Over these September Sundays and the first October Sunday we are taking a look at the Marks of the Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Today we look at that utterly foundational mark of Holy Scripture, the Bible.

It almost goes without saying that a vital vibrant Church of this century will be Biblically based, Biblically informed, Biblically acting and Biblically engaged. Yet too often the obvious has become the oblivious, overlooked, neglected, closed, and The Bible treated as some beautiful but irrelevant antique.

We have a lovely historic leather bound King James Bible under glass in the Church reception area. This Bible was used for many years in the pulpit here before it was retired. Margie and Ham Perkins, whose family gave the Bible to the Church initially, and to whom the Bible had been given back after it was retired, returned this great treasure to its current place of honor two years ago as we were celebrating our 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a congregation.

I love walking past that Bible on the lectern in the reception area and being reminded of the strong biblical heritage in which we stand. I love thinking of the generations of preachers and church members who read from and who heard scripture read from that Bible. I love the inscription of our original education wing immediately west of this sanctuary. Dedicated in 1926, the corner stone reads, "To the Glory of God in the Study of His Word." Yet, if our approach to His Word stops with a beautiful old Bible under glass and a corner stone, we are not getting its message. The cornerstone says, this building is for "the Study of His Word", not the Museuming or the warehousing, archiving of his Word. The study of His word!

We must – as a child's voice sang to Augustine in a garden, "take up and read." He looked down, picked up Romans, read, and was changed.

Every reform and renewal of the Church through the ages has been a recovery of the word of Holy Scripture for our times. As Martin Luther reminded his congregations, "De Te Loquitur – It's Talking about You!" The Scripture is taking you here now today. And John Calvin told his congregation, "So far then, as each of us shall desire to make progress in the knowledge of Christ, it will be necessary that Scripture shall be the subject of our diligent and constant meditation."<sup>1</sup>

When the Jews had returned to Jerusalem after the Exile, Ezra led the people in a great ceremony of renewal as the Word of God was read before the people. This great ceremony took place not in the Temple where only the priests would have had access, but out at the Water Gate, a public place outside the Temple where lay leader shared in leadership. For eight days, from early morning to mid day, the people stood out of respect for the holy text and listened attentively as the Torah was read bit by bit from a specially built pulpit. It was a time of great rejoicing as the people heard again God's Word of purpose and plan for their lives. Hearing they recovered their identity, and committed themselves afresh to following God's revealed Word. The Scriptures were read with interpretation, so that all the people could understand them.

## I

One day Jesus stood up in his home town synagogue and read the Scriptures and then gave interpretation. What began as a routine ordinary synagogue service changed as Jesus gave interpretation. Jesus was brought up in this Nazareth synagogue. These were his people, the folk among whom he had learned the Law, sung the Psalms and prayed the 18 Benedictions. Here in the Nazareth synagogue he heard the lessons and he prayed the prayers many times over his thirty years. He was, remember, a Jew, and all his life he lived within the Tradition of his people. As he begins his public ministry, he is teaching in the synagogues scattered across Galilee and receiving high praise by everyone. This occasion back in his home synagogue, they hand him the scroll for the reading of the day from the prophets. He opens the scroll to Isaiah 61:1-2 and begins.

Notice the importance of Tradition for Jesus. He stands within the established Jewish Tradition of worship in which he was raised. Standing to read, sitting to teach. He honors the rabbis and teachers of the Galilean synagogues. He prays the prayers of his people, especially the Psalms, which we find upon his lips many times.

Now he begins, reading from Isaiah - "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."<sup>ii</sup>

We need to steep ourselves in this Written Word of God if we would know who God is and what God is calling us to. Every event in this church, most centrally the worship of the Church on the Lord's Day, is shaped by this Scripture which we read together. We always read from this book and not from a portion of Shakespeare or Robert Frost or the Koran or the Bhagad Vita. We are rooted and grounded in the Biblical Tradition. For us, Scripture is God's written word of revelation pointing us to the living revelation of Jesus Christ.

Paul writes in his first letter to Timothy, his young disciple, "Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to teaching."<sup>iii</sup> Paul instructs Timothy in his second letter, "Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for

teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”<sup>iv</sup>

Like the Jews before us, we are a people of the Book. Ours is the Revealed God, and the way we know his revelation comes through the amazing record of Holy Scripture, as we recognize that it is speaking to us today. Not to our parents or grand parents, but to us, today.

## II

It is this notion of Tradition for Today that gets Jesus into trouble. After reading the text from Isaiah, Jesus returns the scroll to the synagogue attendant and sits down in the seat of Moses. Sitting in the seat of Moses was the posture in which teaching took place in the synagogue by the rabbi. Jesus is not sitting to relax. He is sitting to assume teaching authority speaking within the tradition. And, the very first public word he utters after his baptism after his wilderness temptation is the word, “Today.” “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Today!

At first they think oh how beautiful, how sweet the Jubilee Year, that prophetic picture Isaiah painted of that day when the poor will receive good news, and the captives will be released, the blind see and the oppressed will be freed.” Jesus says – “Now it has been accomplished - fulfilled right in front of you today.” Only with more expansion and his inclusion of outsiders, do they grasp that the young man who had made their coffee table and kitchen chair in his father’s carpentry shop is claiming to have brought about such fulfillment in himself. And for that, they drive him out of town.

Today, now, in your life and mine, Jesus the messianic fulfillment of the prophet’s longing, makes possible in his own person this new way of living. Today, he wants to fully live in and through us. He is talking about us today. He’s talking about our lives today, and how, because of all God has revealed, and because of the fullness of revelation which Jesus has accomplished, we can live as his people and be about his healing reconciling work. Emerging out of Tradition, Jesus reaches us and teaches us today.

Jesus opens the scrolls of Scripture and teaches. It is crucial that we attend to these teachings, “listening carefully, enjoying the particulars, and looking for the overall picture that emerges, so that we may know the God we’ve got or more specifically “the God who’s got us.”<sup>v</sup> It has been said, “A clean Bible is the mark of a lean Christian!”

“Grant us so to hear all Holy Scriptures, read mark, learn, and inwardly digest them,” is the way one of the great Prayers of Illumination in our Book of Common Worship puts it.<sup>vi</sup> Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest! I cannot overstate how essential it is for us to attend to the Scriptures. Helen Keller, our great Alabama heroine, writes in The Story of My Life, about the breakthrough that came to her in 1887 when Anne Sullivan signed the letters w-a-t-e-r- while holding Helen’s seven year old hand under running water behind the well-house. Helen writes,

“Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten – a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that “w-a-t-e-r” meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free.”<sup>vii</sup>

The Gospel is about God reaching us, awakening us, with his living word, water that never stops refreshing, as surely as Anne Sullivan reached Helen Keller, awakened her, and life was never the same again.

### III

The Tradition is for us today, and it brings Transformation. Jesus changes us and then Jesus enables us to be agents of Transformation. God’s new values of release and recovery and reconciliation begin to work in and through us as the truths of Scripture are received and put into practice. Transformation!

Just look at all the transformation for good that is flowing out of this congregation! I get overwhelmed whenever I think of it. Support groups for Alcoholics Anonymous and substance abusers. Care 5 days a week for Children and the Elderly with Alzheimer’s. Building houses for the homeless. Serving meals and providing entertainment and spiritual nurture for mentally challenged friends - preparing breakfast and Thanksgiving dinner for international students and welcoming them Wednesday nights for a meal, an English class, and now at their request – Bible Study.

We really are making a difference for good. Not because we are good, but because God is good and has deemed this broken world good and greatly loved. Why do we do all this? We undertake these works of help and healing because we keep turning to this Book, and discovering and rediscovering here what God has done, and what God is calling us to do.

As Jesus concluded his sermon on the mount – the wise person who builds their house on the rock that withstands the storms is the one who hears these words of mine and acts upon them.

Once Mother Teresa was invited to attend an international conference on hunger in Bombay, India. Arriving she lost her way and got to the conference late. As she approached the meeting hall she saw a starving man lying on the steps. She stopped to feed him. Inside they were analyzing trends and statistics. Outside Mother Teresa was picking up a starving man and feeding him. Mother Teresa lived out Jesus’ teaching with an intensity few of us will ever reach. But even for her, this was not something that came naturally. This was something she learned from God in Holy Scripture.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his little manual Life Together, emphasized,

“We must learn to know the Scriptures again, as the Reformers and our fathers knew them. We must not grudge the time and the work that it takes. We must know the Scriptures first and foremost for the sake of our salvation. But besides this... How shall we ever attain certainty and confidence in our personal and church activity if we do not stand on solid Biblical ground? It is not our heart that determines our course, but Gods Word.”<sup>viii</sup>

Take a moment and consider- how are you engaging with Scripture today? Today is the time, today is the place to set about an intentional plan to immerse yourself in Scripture that the living Christ may speak afresh to you and shape your life. “Hear the Word of the Lord,” something we do together, not as lone rangers. Together as we the Church gather to hear from the Bible who we are, and to share God’s gifts of bread and wine in Holy Communion, we become part of God’s new people, God’s covenant people throughout the ages, today. The Word of the Lord – It is talking about you today! Thanks be to God! Amen!

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<sup>i</sup> John Calvin, Day By Day With John Calvin, - Daily Devotionals Drawn from Calvin’s Writing, p.228.

<sup>ii</sup> Luke 4:18-19.

<sup>iii</sup> 1 Timothy 4:13.

<sup>iv</sup> 2 Timothy 3:14-17.

<sup>v</sup> William Willimon, Who Will Be Saved?, p.10.

<sup>vi</sup> Book of Common Worship – PCUSA, p.91.

<sup>vii</sup> Helen Keller, The Story of My Life, p.23.

<sup>viii</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together, p.54.