

# Conversations with Scripture

*This is an ongoing newsletter dedicated to the interpretation of Scripture and the Sunday readings from the Roman lectionary.*

## **Breaking Open the Word of God**

- Each week there will be a reflection on the Sunday readings along with some interesting biblical facts

## **19th Sunday in Ordinary Time August 11, 2024**

- (Year B) 1Kings 19:4-8; Psalm 34; Ephesians 4:30-5:2; John 6:41-51

## **Bible and the Visual Arts**

- Each week there will be a visual presentation of a Bible passage along with commentary

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# Scale of the True Faith

Dutch, c. 1600



**This painting was created during the venomous struggles and debates between Catholics and Reformed Christians in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. It was not a time of tolerance or civility – just as our own time is not – and it depicts the deep polarization between the two sides.**

**The scale weighs the two contenders to see which is true. On the left, the Catholics are represented by the pope, bishops, religious, and theologians. This side of the scale is filled with various religious objects deemed holy and necessary by Catholics. In addition, a couple of the Catholics are giving the scale a little extra push.**

**But it was not enough. The others side consists of sober and plainly dressed men of God, and the only object on their side of the scale is the Bible – the Word of God. It is enough; the scale definitely tips in their favor.**

**Although this probably represented the Reformed view of the struggle, there are lessons for all. This represents binary thinking – black and white – right or wrong. The figures in the painting are polarized and there is no dialogue taking place and no real desire to learn from the other side. Several centuries of bloodshed, violence, bigotry, and hatred were the result. Peace, tolerance, and mutuals respect have only come about in the last 60 or so years.**

**There is truth – as well as falsehood – to be found on each side. No one has a monopoly on truth or sanctity. Humility and willingness to listen to those with whom we have differences go a long way.**

## Which one is the Mother of Jesus?



The first Christians had no artistic or iconographic traditions of their own and nothing that was explicitly Christian. They adapted other traditions in ways that expressed the Christian faith. The two pictures above are fine examples.

The mother holding the infant on the left is Mary and the infant Jesus. The one on the right is a different story. The figure is the Egyptian goddess Isis holding her infant son Horus – a common presentation of Isis. How can we tell the difference? Much depends on where the fresco was found – the figure of Mary is from a Christian catacomb. Additionally, the figure of Isis has specific hairstyle, dress, and adornment.



The two iconographic traditions blended and the result is part of our tradition today. Even some of the titles for Isis, such as Star of the Sea, became associated with the tradition of Mary.

This made Christianity very attractive to people in the ancient world in the early centuries. Today, as Christianity meets many different cultures, there are many ways of presenting the images of Mary and Jesus. We are enriched by diversity, not threatened by it.

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Elijah could not take another step – he was finished. At that point, all he wanted was a swift and painless death. There are many who reach that point in their lives. They are overwhelmed, exhausted, and discouraged, and just want an end to their suffering. But this is usually where God steps in – that is, if we are open to God’s intervention. In this story, the angel bringing food and drink to Elijah played a role that is often found in Scripture – God as sustainer and provider. There are echoes of the manna, quail, and water that God provided for the Israelites during their journey through the wilderness of Sinai. Numerous psalms – such as Psalm 65 and 104 – speak of God as the one who provides sustenance for all creatures. In the New Testament, there is a similar message in Matt 6:26 and Luke 12:24: God provides food for the birds of the air, and so much more for humans. Finally, the miraculous feedings provided by Jesus, such as the one in John 6, served as irrefutable evidence of God’s provident care. Refreshed and strengthened by the food and drink provided by the angel, Elijah was able to resume his journey to Mount Horeb. When the psalm urges us to ‘Taste and see, that the Lord is good,’ it is more than a pious statement. It is an invitation to a closer relationship with God and recognition that God is the source of our strength and sustenance. In our life journey, we may reach our limit and be tempted to give up. That is the time to allow God to be present to us and to take over. With God, there is always strength for one more step.

Most believers would be very upset and angry if someone were to deny the Holy Spirit. It is certainly part of our theological arsenal, but sadly, it is not a palpable reality in the lives of many. If we were truly aware of the Spirit’s presence, we would be more careful with our words, thoughts, and actions. Ephesians warns the community against ‘grieving the Spirit.’ And grieved the Spirit must be by the amount of ‘bitterness, wrath, malice, and slander’ that seems to have taken hold of so many individuals and communities in the Church and in all religious bodies. An outside observer would be hard pressed at times to find evidence of the Spirit’s presence. The antidote to this poison is kindness, forgiveness, and gentleness. That is the only way that we can be like God. If God seems distant to us, then the practice of these virtues will draw God close.

The crowd around Jesus did not take kindly to his insistence that he was the bread come down from heaven. How could he be since they knew his family and where he came from? But they were interpreting his words in a literal and materialistic manner, which was the failing of all spiritually unenlightened people in the Gospel of John – and often our failing. Jesus recognized that not all would be open to his words. He observed that those who did come to him had been open to God all along. They had been taught and guided by God. Even so, they had not seen God nor had anyone else – Jesus alone had been in God’s presence, and he alone could grant access to others. With the metaphors of flesh and bread, Jesus revealed what he brings to those who believe: permanence and eternal life. Jesus carries life within him and is able to bestow it on whomever he chooses. This life will be granted to those who make Jesus their food and drink – their very sustenance. John’s gospel calls this gift eternal life, and it is made clear that those who believe can begin to experience this even while they still live on earth. It refers not to a duration of life, but a quality – living in the awareness of the immediate presence of God. The bread come down from heaven is far more than food for the journey – it is the source of a whole new life.

## *Who Was First?*

Which books of the New Testament were written first? In what order were the gospels written? It is easy to be misled by the order in which we find the books in our bibles. In fact, the oldest book in the New Testament – written before all the others – was Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians, written somewhere between 48 and 50 AD. When Paul wrote his letters, none of the gospels had been written.

Not only that, but not all the letters attributed to Paul are judged by scholars to have been written by him. The ‘authentic’ or ‘undisputed’ letters are Romans, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon, and 1 Thessalonians.

Because of differences in style, Greek vocabulary, theology, community structure, and ecclesiology, these letters are dubious or ‘deutero-Pauline’: 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Timothy. They were probably written by followers of Paul – a common practice in the ancient world – and possibly date from the next generation.

What does that mean for us? Are these dubious letters still valid and useful? By all means! But we have to take care in attributing (or in some cases blaming) Paul for things that he probably never said. We are able to see doctrine and ethics developing over time as the communities faced various pressures and challenges. We are inspired by their zeal and perseverance. But not everything in them is valid for us today – we do not (at least we should not) demand that wives submit to their husbands. Rather than being an accepted practice, slavery is deemed a great evil and unacceptable in civilized society. Times change, and so do we (hopefully!).

As for the Gospels, the sparse and rough Gospel of Mark was written first, possibly between 60 and 70 AD. Matthew and Luke were written in approximately 85 AD. Both of them borrowed heavily from Mark, but each added both their own material and verses from a common unknown source called ‘Q’ by scholars (for ‘quelle’, which is German for source). Finally, John was written towards the end of the century – 90-100 AD – and is sort of an outlier. John’s theology and presentation of Jesus is very different, and his telling of the story diverges in some important ways from the other three gospels.

This tells us that in the first Christian century, there was considerable theological diversity – and we are the richer for it. Diversity, debate, and dialogue deepens our understanding and faith.