

God's Plan Revealed

By Rev. James V. Schall, S.J.

February 4, 2018 – Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: Job 7.1-4; 1 Corinthians 9.16-19; 22-23; Mark 1.29-39

Let us go elsewhere to the neighboring country towns, so that I can preach there too.

– Mark 1.38

After Christ died and had risen again, the apostles and their followers wondered: What did Christ's life mean? They were puzzled. Christ seemed to have abandoned them. Where could they go to help them understand these astonishing events that they had witnessed? With no further explanation, most people on hearing them would think that they were crazy. The crucifixion many witnessed, but resurrection was too much. The ascension meant that Christ was no longer physically among them as he had been before.

As good Hebrews, however, the first place they looked for help in understanding these events was naturally in the Hebrew bible. The apostles were fishermen all right, but they were intelligent men also. On reading scripture carefully, something they already knew, they began to see that a plan was outlined there. Certain passages from bygone days seemed to point to an event that would happen, to a Son of David who would come. They realized that Jesus was this Messiah long promised.

Two Related Testaments

They began to think that much of Christ's life had been foreshadowed in the Old Testament. They read these passages in the light of what they remembered Christ to have said to them. When they came to write it down, we see that the New Testament is filled with references to the Old Testament that help explain who this Christ was. He was clearly human, yet more than that too. He said that he was sent by his Father and that he would return to him, which he evidently did.

In this tradition of seeing how the two Testaments relate to each other, the Church came to organize itself as a body that worshipped God in the way Christ taught them. They were told to preserve the Last Supper as the center of their worship, as the proper way God was to be acknowledged and worshipped. They formed a liturgy that we call the Mass. Each Mass contained a recollection of the words of Christ or the apostles. The reading was commented on, explained. The Christian congregation was supposed to know what was going on.

The Church finally put together passages from the Old and New Testaments that seemed to illuminate each other. They were read aloud before the rite of consecration took place. The Church knew that we understand things gradually, not everything at once. In the course of a year, they worked their way through differing books of scripture. They soon discovered that scripture contained many differing kinds of narration. It needed to be read slowly and in

parts to understand its significance. So each Sunday, each weekday, every Mass has two or three readings from one or other Testament. The last reading is always from one of the four gospels.

Thus, in today's readings, for example, we have passages from the book of Job, from 1 Corinthians, and from the gospel of Mark. If we read them together, we can see certain themes that seem to explain what this plan of God was all about. Each passage stands on its own, has something to tell us. Yet, when seen in the light of other passages, we understand more. We are supposed to know what is going on. Catholics are supposed to be intelligent people who know what they are doing in their worship.

Mark's Gospel

To see how it works, let us begin by recounting the passage from Mark in today's gospel. Peter had a sick mother-in-law. That is an interesting point in itself, that Peter had a mother-in-law. He knew what a family was about. His brother Andrew lived in the same house.

When Christ was informed that Peter's mother-in-law had a fever, he went in, took her by the hand, and cured her. She got up and took care of the household without further comment. Hearing of this happening, many of the neighbors came about to be cured also.

The next morning, Christ gets up before dawn. He goes off to pray. It is well to note that Christ prayed. Waking up later, Peter sets out to find him. He tells Christ that "everyone is looking for him." Christ decides not to stay in Peter's hometown. Instead, he goes off to preach in various surrounding towns in Galilee.

Christ seems to have considered obscure small towns important enough to hear what he had to tell them. When someone would not listen, he told the disciples elsewhere to brush the dust off of their feet and go to someplace that would listen to him. We should note two things here: (1) Christ wanted even out of the way places to hear him; but (2) many would refuse to listen. When this refusal happened, he said that it would be better in Tyre and Sidon than in their hometown. In other words, what Christ took the trouble to tell these small town citizens was not neutral, not something they could take or leave with impunity.

We are not told in this passage what Christ preached about. Devils were cast out; people were cured. He left one place to go to another. A certain urgency seems to have driven him on.

Job and Paul

If we next take a look at the passage from Job, it seems completely odd. Life on earth is sometimes said to be a drudgery, sometimes something passing too quickly. Job will never again see "joy." This is how it all seemed to Job. Nothing much could be hoped for. This view of Job is very modern. Many people have no explanation of things. The fact that we find this passage in scripture tells us that God knows how many men and women think, how they look on their lot. It is this view of things that Christ came to resolve.

Finally, we come to Corinthians. Paul also talks about his preaching the gospel, what he heard from Christ. He did not choose to preach of his own accord. He might have been paid to preach, but he did it freely. In fact, offering the Good News freely is one of his great responsibilities and delights. Some things, usually the best things, we cannot buy. They are given to us freely on the part of the giver.

Paul insists that he is not "a slave to any man." The ancient world knew about slavery. It wasn't pretty. But, for emphasis, Paul was willing to make himself available to anyone who needed to hear him. Paul was quite sure that if he did this preaching, he would himself share in the gospel's blessings. And if he didn't, he would deserve its punishments.

Most of us, on reading him, see Paul as a pretty tough customer. After all, he was, as he tells us, a leader in persecuting the early Church. He held the garments while they stoned Stephen to death. Yet, he considered himself to be "weak." In a famous passage, he told us that he "makes himself all things to all men" so that they might hear the

Good News. He did not want his own personality to be an excuse for not hearing what he had been commissioned to make known.

More than We Expected

The whole bible is, in many ways, a massive book. It is not an easy read. Yet, when we take it carefully and slowly, we begin to see that more is there than we expected. This week we recall Job, Corinthians, and Mark. In another week, it will be Isaiah, Romans, and Luke. We seek to know how it all fits together. Like Job, many will find scripture, like life, dreary. The plan of salvation is addressed to them too. It is directed to citizens in small towns whom no one has ever heard of.

In the beginning of Mark, we are told that what is said is intended for all the nations, small town by small town. It takes time to reach everyone. Many will not listen. This refusal to listen also falls within the divine plan, for God cannot and does not force us to follow him.

Christ decided to go to other towns in Galilee to preach his Good News, and he still comes to us in our own towns, cities, and countrysides for the same reason he went to Peter's house – to heal, to preach, to be sure we know that the Son of God has dwelt among us.

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For Further Reading

Bishop Robert Barron, [“Pope Benedict and How to Read the Bible”](#)

Catechism of the Catholic Church, [##101-141](#)

Michael Davies, [A Short History of the Roman Mass](#)

Michael Deem, [“Peter’s Primacy . . . and His Mother-in-law”](#)

In Short . . .

- ***On reading scripture carefully, the apostles and their followers began to see that a plan was outlined there, and they realized that Jesus was the Messiah long promised.***
- ***The early Church organized itself as a body that worshipped God as Christ taught them, preserving the Last Supper and forming a liturgy that we call the Mass.***
- ***Christ wanted even out of the way places to hear him, and many would refuse to listen, but his message was not neutral, not something they could take or leave with impunity.***
- ***The refusal to listen falls within the divine plan, for God cannot and does not force us to follow him.***
- ***Christ still comes to us in our own towns, cities, and countrysides to heal, to preach, to be sure we know that the Son of God has dwelt among us.***