

Another Way to See the Bible: Lesson 3 Thursday

*Begin with an open heart and a curious mind. God is always present – most times, we are the distant and absent ones. So, put yourself prayerfully and purposefully in God's presence; pray this simple prayer: **Maranatha. Come, Lord.** Then, be still, be open, be present. Read slowly. Stay with what touches (or disturbs) you. Offer it to God who blesses and transforms.*

In the last lesson, Richard Rohr explored how the Bible mirrors human development. As historian René Girard said, it is a “text in travail.” Scripture reveals humanity’s gradual stumbling toward deeper and more authentic love.

Within the Hebrew Scriptures we see an important development. The Hebrew prophets had the ability to think self-critically. They recorded the acts of good kings and bad. They asked hard questions and spoke truth to power. Truly mature people and faiths are able to look at themselves honestly and humbly, acknowledge their imperfections, and be willing to change and grow.

The biblical authors found divine revelation in what most of us would call the problem—the negative, accidental, or even “sinful.” Unlike many secular historical accounts, the Bible is written from the perspective of the losers, the outcasts, the poor, the enslaved, the conquered. Father Richard calls this “the bias from the bottom.”

Jesus modelled this kind of topsy-turvy wisdom, valuing the weak and vulnerable more than the political and religious institutions of his time did. While Jesus spoke out against injustice and critiqued those in authority, he didn’t try to avoid the lessons of pain. He could have aligned with the powerful, but instead he sided with those who were suffering.

Jesus often spoke in riddles, using parables and metaphors more than absolutes.

When asked what the greatest commandments were, he didn't give precise, concrete rules but simply said: "Love God and love your neighbor" (see Matthew 22:35-40 and Mark 12:28-34).

Jesus frequently taught with questions more than statements, inviting people to search their own hearts. And as he hung on the cross, he wasn't afraid to ask, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46).

In this lesson, Richard introduces the Jewish practice of *midrash*. Jesus was familiar with the Hebrew approach to finding multiple true interpretations of Scripture on different levels, beyond the factual or literal. Midrash asks many questions without always expecting or requiring an answer.

German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) wrote in his *Letters to a Young Poet*:

I want to ask you, as clearly as I can, to bear with patience all that is unresolved in your heart, and try to love the questions themselves... For everything must be lived. Live the questions now, perhaps then, someday, you will gradually, without noticing, live into the answer.

As you read Richard's reflection, sit with your own questions without rushing toward clarity. Hold the questions in the light of your life and experience.

Midrash: Many Levels of Meaning

More than telling us exactly *what to see* in the Scriptures, Jesus taught us *how to see*, *what to emphasize*, and also *what could be de-emphasized or ignored*. Beyond fundamentalist or literalist, Jesus practiced a form of *midrash*, consistently using questions to keep spiritual meanings open, often reflecting on a text or returning people's questions with more questions.

Rather than seeking always certain and unchanging answers, the Jewish practice of *midrash* allows many possibilities, many levels of

faith-filled meaning—meaning that is relevant and applicable to you, the reader, and puts you in the subject's shoes to build empathy, understanding, and relationship. It lets the passage first challenge *you* before it challenges anyone else. To use the text in a spiritual way—as Jesus did—is to allow it to convert you, to change you, to grow you up as you respond: What does this ask of me? How might this apply to my life, to my marriage, to my church, to my neighbourhood, to my country?

While biblical messages often proceed from historical incidents, the actual message does not depend upon communicating those events with perfect factual accuracy. Spiritual writers are not primarily journalists. Hebrew rabbis and scholars sometimes used the approach of *midrash* to reflect on a story and communicate all of its underlying message. Scripture can be understood on at least four levels: literal meaning, deep meaning, comparative meaning, and hidden meaning.

The *literal* level of meaning doesn't get to the root and, in fact, is the least helpful to the soul and the most dangerous for history. *Deep* meaning offers symbolic or allegorical applications. *Comparative* study combines different texts to explore an entirely new meaning. Finally, in traditional Jewish exegesis, *hidden* meaning gets at the Mystery itself. Midrash allows and encourages each listener to grow with a text and not to settle for mere literalism, which of itself bears very little spiritual fruit.

Whatever is received is received according to the manner of the receiver. This was drilled into me during my seminary education. People at different levels of maturity will interpret the same text in different ways. There is no one right way to interpret sacred texts. *How you see is what you see*; the *who* that you bring to your reading of the Scriptures matters. Who are you when you read the Bible? Defensive, offensive, power-hungry, righteous? Or humble, receptive, and honest? Surely, this is why we need to pray before reading a sacred text!