

### Censoring the Bible Easter 5 2012

Genesis 22<sup>1-18</sup> p22, Acts 8<sup>26-40</sup> p1101, I John 4<sup>7-21</sup> p1227, John 15<sup>1-8</sup> p1083

The Church seems to have got into the habit of censoring the Bible. Instead of reading it through day by day, we're invited to read selected passages, depending on the season. So some passages we read several times in the year and some parts of the Bible are never read publicly out loud at all. Our Sunday readings and psalms sometimes suggest omitting verses in case they are too long, or the ideas in them might be considered too difficult for a modern congregation to understand, or perhaps uncongenial to their refined sensibilities, even if they could comprehend them. We take a blue pencil to the sex and violence in the Bible. We gloss over its political incorrectness. So we tame the Bible. We do this particularly for children so that they know only Jesus meek and mild and are not introduced to the innumerable other facets of the multi-faceted Word of God. Their childish Christian education, purged of violence and sex, death, fear and doubt, when, as teenagers, these very things become the subject of tumultuous changes in their minds and bodies, they turn to violent video games and internet pornography in their efforts to make sense of the world. The Bible, the Christian faith, purged of everything nasty, seems to them an irrelevance in the real world. Christianity appears only to be important in the Church and has nothing worthwhile to say to the real world. A castrated religion is impotent to beget life. Church services become a leisure activity and the life of the local Church relegates itself to the realm of pleasures and pastimes.

I John 4<sup>7</sup>: *Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and everyone that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God.* You could read that in a soppy, sentimental, milk and water sort of way. But today's lessons won't let you do that if you take them seriously. Consider the terrible story of the Binding of Isaac. Before we explain the horror away in the light of the "happy" ending, just think what it must have meant to Abraham to be told to sacrifice his son? What kind of a God would do that? What did Sarah, and Ishmael and Hagar (if they heard about it), and the servants think about it? How did Isaac feel, as it gradually dawned on him that he was to become a human sacrifice, when his father bound him to the altar and took the sacrificial knife in his hand? What kind of a God? What does faith really mean when the chips are down? Where does the individual stand in relation to the family? Where does he stand in relation to God? Where do God and the family stand in relation to one another? And what part do the opinions of other people play in our own personal formation?

And come to that, the end is not unalloyedly happy. It certainly isn't happy for the ram caught in the thicket which becomes the substitute sacrifice. And, of course, this ram caught in the thicket comes to be seen as a type of Jesus. Jesus, the Son of God, becomes the sacrifice Whom God will provide. What sort of a God? What sort of a Son? Just how seriously is evil to be taken?

The Acts reading picks up the same theme. The Ethiopian wants S Philip to explain to him the Word of God. He is reading Isaiah, *He was led as sheep to the slaughter.* Who was? And why? Philip explains that the prophet means Jesus, a sheep led to the slaughter. When the Ethiopian understands what this means, he is baptised into the death and resurrection of Jesus. He is buried with Christ. He puts to death the things of the flesh. Only so can the

baptised know that they are free from sin, free also to live with him. Life only makes sense in the context of death. Eternal life is achieved through the Cross alone. Faith necessarily implies sacrifice and yet through sacrifice there is eternal life and light and love.

And so to the Gospel reading. Christian people are one with Christ, the true Vine. It is only in Him and through Him that we bring forth the fruits of the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life. We are as close to Jesus as the branches are to the vine, part of Him, nourished by the sap arising through Him, fruitful because we are one with Him. To be one with Christ is to walk in the Light, but, even in this passage, there is a dark side. The unfruitful branches are cut out of the vine. They dry up. They are gathered together and burnt. Judgment is both real and terrible. Atonement and forgiveness come at a tremendous price, the Cross of Jesus, which Christian people are commanded to take up and follow.

Life is tough. Love is tough. Faith can be very hard. Relationships are sometimes very difficult. The world throws up all kinds of challenges to our thinking. Death is an ever present reality. Life is hard but in God we have all the resources we need to meet its challenge. Love makes complete sense when we are faithful in the whole of our lives.

*Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and everyone that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God*