Reflections for our Discerners at the DeSales University’s Center for Discernment
by Dr. Stephen Loughlin

10.10.08: The Spiritual Sense of Holy Scriptures

Fr. Burn’s excellent sermon on Monday about the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) caused me to revisit the process that I go through when I try to understand a particular passage in Scripture. Taking this parable as my example, then, allow me to describe how I do this.

First, I attend to what is obvious, namely the details of the parable itself. I do this so that it might begin to imprint itself upon my memory and form my experience:

“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’ ”

Next, I carefully consider the context within which the parable appears:

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” He answered: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied, “Do this and you will live.” But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” In reply Jesus said: [the parable begins here]...“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

When I consider the context (an extremely important thing), I might, in this case, begin by considering the person of Christ’s questioner, namely an expert in the law, and the reasons for which he speaks, namely to test Jesus, presumably with the intent of determining whether Jesus is a true teacher or Rabbi of the things of God. I suspect that this is his motive based not only upon Christ’s respect for him, but also upon the fact that he offers quickly and solidly, when questioned by Christ, the very heart of the law itself, namely to love God with all one’s person, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself, and these in the correct order (one does not rightly know how to love one’s neighbor unless one is conformed in mind and heart first to God). I might continue by considering the nature of the interaction between Jesus and the expert in the law. It seems the exchange begins with Jesus being put in the “dock,” so to speak by our expert in the law (or might we say lawyer?). There next occurs a reversal of roles, where the lawyer supplies the answer to his own question consequent upon Christ asserting His authority in the turning of the question back to His opponent, in His judgment upon the answer that was given, and the commissioning of the lawyer to act in this way. Finally there is the last and rather feeble attempt by our lawyer to reestablish the status that he had so quickly lost in this exchange, giving rise to this powerful story from our Savior, the final series of questions, the call made once again by Christ to go and do likewise, and the absence of a response on the part of our lawyer who, hopefully, did not require a “smack to the back of the head” to effect in his actions what he knew clearly to be the case. I might also consider the fact that Jesus tells a story in response to a question that, when asked in other contexts at other times, occasions a
far more direct response from Him. This suggests to me that the kind of answers that Jesus offers to those who question Him are crafted in light of the person to whom Christ is speaking. Thus we have one of the principles of teaching and a central principle of Christian metaphysics: whatever is received is received according to the mode of the recipient. In other words, the gift of grace is fashioned in light of the condition of the one to whom the gift is given and not in light of the beauty and nobility of the gift itself. To see this point well demonstrated, consider Bishop Fulton J. Sheen’s comment upon John 12:20ff, where Jesus is visited by some people from Greece. His language to them is not only beautiful and suggestive, but from the perspective of Greek thought itself, wholly appropriate to the categories of Greek philosophy, namely the image of the seed that must fall to the ground, die in its bursting, so that new growth might arise (in his *Physics*, Aristotle will use the example of an acorn falling to the ground which only generates the oak tree insofar as it, the acorn, ceases to be an acorn — any educated Greek would have understood instantly what Christ was saying, and would have been profoundly impacted at the application of this principle to Christ’s very person). In this image, the whole of the salvation story is laid out in such a fashion that even those who do not come from the Judaic tradition understand its very meaning. Thus Christ does not cast the pearls of the Jewish faith before non-believers (see Matthew 7:6). Instead, he allows the bread that falls from the table to feed them instead (see Matthew 15:21-28).

By the very length of this paragraph alone, you might discern that I could very easily continue with these sorts of reflections (I haven’t even mentioned the choice of the words used throughout the parable). While this might be attributed to my talent as a professor, to focus on this capacity primarily would be to mistake severely the true agent at work here, namely the author of Holy Scripture, God Himself, and the very riches that He intentionally embeds in the whole of His work. It is true that human authors took pen (quill?) in hand and composed intentionally and lovingly the Scriptures that we have today. However, tradition has always invited us to go beyond the literal and historical details, and the contexts within which they are embedded, and to consider the senses of Holy Scripture that are intended not by its human authors but by the Divine Author Himself. This latter our tradition calls the spiritual sense of Scripture, something which is based on and presupposes the literal and historical sense. As St. Gregory the Great states: “Holy Scripture by the manner of its speech transcends every discipline, because in one and the same sentence, while it describes a fact, it reveals a mystery.” St. Thomas describes three ways by which the spiritual sense of Scripture manifests these mysteries:

...so far as the things of the Old Law signify the things of the New Law, there is the allegorical sense; so far as the things done in Christ, or so far as the things which signify Christ, are types of what we ought to do, there is the moral sense. But so far as they signify what relates to eternal glory, there is the anagogical sense... (ST. I. 1. 10)

The entirety of the Holy Scriptures, then, considers the past, the present and the future: the past, insofar as the Old Law is, as St. Paul states (Hebrews 10:1), a figure of the New Law, something which points to and anticipates the fullness found in the person of Christ; the present, in the person of Christ as He teaches us how to imitate Him here and now in all that we think, do and feel (remember, morality is not essentially about rules or laws governing human behavior. Rather, it is about what is required on our part to attain to our happiness wherein is found the fullness and authenticity of our very nature and persons); the future, as we are taught the nature of, and thus to hope in, the glory that awaits us in the life to come. When Scripture is read in this fashion, we begin to discover its riches. We go beyond the created minds and hearts of its human authors and the contexts within which they lived and begin to touch the very mind and heart of our Creator, seeing everything from the perspective of the Eternal Now (see Book XI of St. Augustine’s *Confessions*), and to begin to participate of that very Wisdom which characterizes the life of the Trinity Itself. Thus, while the literal, the
historical, the archeological, the psychological, and the sociological are important to our understanding of Holy Scripture, they are never to displace in our minds and hearts its spiritual sense, which is nothing less than a consideration of the Word as the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Allow me to finish with one example of a spiritual reading of the Good Samaritan from the moral perspective (as defined by Aquinas above), a reading which is near and dear to my heart:

I see the parable of the Good Samaritan as providing the way by which one in a position of responsibility deals with those who have been led astray. In particular, I am thinking of myself as a professor in relation to those who have been misled by the culture of our day. For the most part, I cannot help but see the majority of people that I teach as casualties of this age, especially insofar as teachers before me have failed, through their own sloth, in their duty to develop at least the reasoning capacities of their charges. Few things are as evident to me as the recent decline in literacy, that is, the increasing inability of people to reason for themselves, to appreciate the arts, literature, music and poetry, and finally to express themselves adequately (let alone well or even beautifully) in oral and written form. When these things are missing or severely compromised, people inevitably slide into simplistic forms of reasoning, acting, loving and believing, all of which do great injustice not only to their humanity and the intellectual traditions of which they stand in such great need, but also the very complexity and beauty of reality itself from which all these spring in the first place. In short, when one takes away the very things that allow us to operate in an authentically human way, we become subject to the most inhumane of forces, robbed of the riches of our heritage, stripped of our dignity and our promise, and left to nurse the wounds of our corruption which can only result in a painful ignoble death.

Those who travel “the straight and narrow path” are called not to pass by this tragedy, nor to cross to the opposite side of the road and thus separate themselves from this horror insofar as it is possible. Instead, a seeming paradox arises, namely that we are called to “leave” this path and descend into the very condition that afflicts our fellow traveller, so that in the midst of that condition we can begin to bandage his wounds with the riches that we enjoy travelling the road that we do, loading him, in my case, upon the little and humble donkey of philosophy, and calling upon those of like vocation to engage in this work, to continue what we ourselves cannot do alone, and thus effect communally our unfortunate traveller’s reclamation in the hope that one day he too might become leaven or salt for the world. We are not called to hurl our bread from the safety of the road or to blame the victim for the plight into which he has fallen. We are not called to keep ourselves apart from the taint and suffering of this world, nor to consider ourselves lucky not to suffer the plight of our brother. We are not called to feel justified in our position upon the way, nor to be pleased in our good sense, nor to spout pious and learned words in the things we write, discussions we have, classes we teach and sermons we deliver (see Luke 18:9-14). Instead, we must, as Christ does, descend, take on the humble form of those so abused, suffer all the things that he suffers (except the abused person’s sin and error insofar as this is possible), and thus be able to fashion the gift with which we have been entrusted and that we have bought at so high a price, so that it might be received fully and beautifully by our fellow sufferer, meeting him where he is and, through this gift so appropriately molded to his condition, draw him up onto the heights to which the sons and daughters of God are called (see Philippians 2:1-18).

You can see by the account I have offered that the human authors of Scriptures could not have intended its content or context. Nor is it the case that I simply weave this account according to my own artistic bent. The
Scripture itself is pregnant with such understandings and is ready to give birth to them as we sit, as Mary, at the feet of Jesus both in the silent prayer and contemplation that we enjoy, and as we bring the posture of Mary to our work as Martha in the world. One could literally spend a lifetime contemplating the wisdom that such passages contain and not reach the end of them. Remain alert and sober, then, as Peter advises (1 Peter 5:8). Pray always for the gift of wisdom, and remain alert for the spirit’s stirring of the waters (see John 5 for this image. If you have the time, compare John 5 with the parable of the Good Samaritan where Jesus, the one who heals in both cases, brings the lesson to bear upon those who question him, but, unlike the silence and thus the agreement of our lawyer in the parable (silence under the law betokens agreement), these people begin from that moment on to plot his murder. In this, you can begin to discern not only the logic of hatred (as this is horrifically yet beautifully described in Wisdom 2), but also the ultimate price that one pays in descending into the midst of sin and error as a Christian, something beautifully exemplified by Christ in his noble and kingly bearing before Caiaphas, the scribes and elders at Matthew 26:57-68 in the declaration of the Truth that He is and in the beating that he receives).

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