

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, A – July 30, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 850 words

This Sunday’s parables, including the famous one of the pearl of great price, close out the series of our Lord’s instructions on the Kingdom of Heaven that are found in the thirteenth chapter of St. Matthew’s gospel. And with its concluding exhortation about being “instructed scribes”, we have a particular opportunity to consider the riches of our Catholic faith – the faith being that pearl of great price that the good God has entrusted to us. More than that, reflecting also on King Solomon’s prayer for an “understanding heart” in the first reading, we can think about how we internalize this faith, share it with others, and how we ourselves live it out in faithful prayer and worship.

“Every scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven”, Christ says, “is like the head of a household, who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old”. A scribe was someone who sought to understand the word of God, put it into practice, and teach it to others. But what is this “new and old” that our Lord also mentions? In effect, he is teaching them to embrace the entire treasure of faith – not to be like those many scribes with whom he so often clashed with throughout the gospel, who focused on only a part of what God revealed, thinking they knew everything, but being, in fact, blind.

As Catholics, when we speak about the word of God we mean more than just “the Bible” – unlike many of our brethren in other Christian denominations. The word of God is more than just Old and New Testaments, more than Scripture: it is also comprised of tradition. In fact, tradition is what there was in the beginning, and it was the Church that discerned which of the many sacred writings that were handed down through Jewish and later Christian peoples were inspired by God; the Church gave us the Bible as we have it today. Scripture and tradition go together, and together they are the full revealed word of God.

“Tradition” is perhaps a difficult category to understand. The Catechism teaches us that “through Tradition, the Church, in her doctrine, life and worship, perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes”.<sup>1</sup> As St. John the Evangelist wrote at the end of his gospel, “there are also many other things that Jesus did; if they were all written down, I suppose the world itself could not contain the books that should be written”.<sup>2</sup> Although the world could not contain all the books, the Church, through sacred tradition, preserves the memory of all that God has revealed.

Therefore, as scribes in the Kingdom of Heaven, who are striving to understand the full word of God, put it into practice, and teach it to others, we draw from the rich treasury of our Church; from all that she teaches and hands on to us. That means that we have a lot to learn and this learning never ends: not at First Communion, not at Confirmation, not at Ordination. Each one of us, as a disciple of Christ, is called to seek instruction – not only by striving to follow the promptings of God in daily life, but also by continuing to study and learn the faith. We must always go deeper. Our parish is therefore a place not only of prayer and outreach, but of learning as well.

Studying the word of God is far more than a quest for information and facts; it is an encounter with a person – with Jesus Christ, who is the word made flesh. Our studying of scripture and tradition must therefore be accompanied by prayer, which is the way that we daily commune with the Lord. In this regard, the prayer of Solomon in today’s first reading, asking the Lord for an “understanding heart”, is most useful. There are aspects of Christ’s example and

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<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 78.

<sup>2</sup> John 21:25.

teaching that challenge us; there are teachings of the Church that we find hard or perhaps do not even understand. We need an “understanding heart”, illumined by God’s grace, to be able to grasp more fully what he has revealed and handed down to us through the Church that he founded.

And our knowledge of God’s word is not meant to enrich only ourselves, but others as well. It is also meant to change how we pray and worship. I will speak more about these themes in the coming two weeks. (Yes, I’m doing a three part homily series.) This week, though, let us focus on King Solomon’s prayer: “Lord, give your servant an understanding heart”. Help us to govern our lives rightly according to your word. Help us, O Lord, not to pick and choose, but instead to choose all – to embrace all that you have revealed, the new and the old, the easy and the hard – and to be transformed by it. In knowing you we will love and serve you and our neighbors more fully. Lord, please give to us all an “understanding heart”. Amen.