

Third Sunday of Easter, Year B – April 14, 2024 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham – 5pm Sat. Vigil; 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 795 words

The Jewish understanding of prophecy tended to be broader than ours. We know prophecy to be a specific category, a genre among others. In common parlance, when we speak of “prophecy”, we tend to think of a prediction concerning the future; not an amateurish guess, a shot in the dark, but a truth foretold by God himself – that is, a sharing in divine foreknowledge. In a more technical sense, we know that “prophecy” also refers to a pronouncement concerning God’s will for the present, not just about future states of affairs.

And so, applying those definitions, we identify a certain selection of books of the Old Testament as being “prophetic” in nature and as thus having been written by prophets – by men who pronounced the word of God, who told of the divine will, whether it was with regard to present or future realities. Such books include Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, for example. Other books of the bible fall under different classifications – whether they are more historical in nature, impart maxims of wisdom, or embrace other genres and styles.

But one thing we notice throughout the Acts of the Apostles, as we hear the first homilies given by Peter and the others in the early Church, is a reference to how Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of all the prophets, of all the prophecies of God, of all God’s promises. And when, for example, we take a closer look at specifically what promises – for example, in today’s passage, about how “God has thus brought to fulfillment what he had announced beforehand through the prophets, that his Christ would suffer” –, we might come away a bit befuddled.

For although there are prophecies about a “Suffering Servant” in some of what we know to be the “prophetic books” of the Old Testament – that is, those books that contain “prophecy” in our technical sense –, yet those references are relatively few. But if we broaden our vision and consider the psalms and the many references in them to death and resurrection; if we think about the sacrifice of Isaac recounted in one of the “historical books”; and various other Old Testament references –, well, suddenly, a clearer picture of a suffering Messiah emerges.

Yes, the Jewish people had a broader understanding of prophecy than we in all our theological refinement have had. While this or that rabbi or other scholar might have agreed with us on technical definitions, at the same time, he would have seen the entire Old Testament as a story in search of a conclusion, as so many individual parts that looked for fulfillment – whether in the end times, in a “day of the Lord”, or in a Messiah. They might not have agreed on exactly which concept would be the fulfillment, but they all searched for something more.

Jesus is that “something more” that all the scriptures till then pointed toward. Thus, in today’s gospel, “[h]e said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and in the prophets and psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures”, it said. All of scripture until then had been a pronouncement by God concerning past, present or future. And all those “prophecies” in some way found their fulfillment in our Lord Jesus Christ.

So the apostles and their successors set out to preach that same message, to put together the pieces, to bind the whole together. Jesus Christ is the key to human history – only in him does it make sense. And so we see a pattern in their preaching, too: first they speak about the objective facts of what God has done and who he is; then, they make a subjective application to their hearers, showing how those objective facts apply to them unto salvation also. This pattern is valid for all time, and Jesus Christ is the only possible savior of every human being.

Our second reading, from the First Letter of Saint John, a sort of catechesis to new Christians, readily picks up this same theme, for it tells us that Christ is “expiation for our sins, and not for our sins only but for those of the whole world.” Jesus is for everyone. And how much

we and all our fellow men and women of today need to know this! Empires rise and fall; fashions and times change; but “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and for ever”. From that first preaching of Christ himself to his Apostles, to their preaching to the early Church, down to our preaching today, the word goes forth: Jesus is the key to history, the fulfillment of all God’s promises.