

## Acts 1 and John 17

I was struck in our Acts reading by the high regard Peter shows the scriptures.

“Brothers, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David...” So whose word was that Old Testament Psalm and prophecy – David’s Word, that is to say, man’s word, or The Holy Spirit, that is to say God’s word? Answer both. The Scriptures are, the Word is, true God and true man.

Much like the Word takes on flesh and dwells among us, Jesus, true God and true man. Can we separate Jesus from the Scriptures? I don’t think it’s possible. Even as they are all, even the Old Testament, about him, of him, and the Spirit gives testimony to it. And should we doubt: take it from Jesus himself in our Gospel lesson “I have given them the words that you [The Father] gave me.” And so the Word, Jesus, who is true God and true Man is One with the Father and so His word is the Father’s authoritative word.

But the connections don’t stop there. For Jesus continues, “And they [the disciples he is praying for] have received them.” That is, the Words of the Father, that Jesus gave them. The disciples actually had them, and proclaimed them – the words of God. And then they took those words and put them down on parchment so we could know them too. Words written down by the eyewitnesses themselves, the

ones who heard the words from Jesus himself. Again, the words of true men in real languages. But don't miss what Jesus is saying here in the upper room: They are the Father's words, given through Him.

Back to acts "One of these men [who have been with Jesus since his baptism to ascension] must become with us a witness to his resurrection." We aren't making any more Apostles, folks, (not with a capital A) because we aren't making any more eyewitnesses. We aren't adding more books to the Bible, either, because none of us carry that authority of an eyewitness, or have the confirmation of the testimony of an eyewitness (say, for example, the Gospel of Mark, when Mark wasn't a disciple, but, likely Peter, gave authority to his writing).

So while we aren't making more of these things, don't think for a second we have not received the benefits of that authority. At the risk of spoiling a sermon for next week, Jesus' high priestly prayer in our Gospel reading goes on. I said that he was praying for his disciples and he was, no mistake, when he said they received his authoritative Word. But then listen to John 17:20 "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their Word." So he is also praying for those who believe on account of the Apostle's Word, which is who? You.

You. You, sitting in that pew, not the person next to you, well, them too, but YOU are prayed for by Jesus on Maundy Thursday before he is taken captive. Which is

beautiful. So beautiful! You with your doubts and fears and sin, you, who can't ever seem to catch a break, you are so loved. But don't miss the implication either, Jesus is saying that you have received an authoritative Word. The Bible you have is True man, "written by a bunch of dead guys," but also true God, flowing from Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That Word is Yours.

And I already know the objections – because I suffer from a cynical brain too. "But there are thousands of manuscripts and hundreds of copy errors!" True enough. But a few points to consider: First, if our book is so bad because of the manuscripts, well, then you are admitting there are a whole lot of manuscripts, like, real, readable, verifiable, historical, actual, evidence that these men lived and died and proclaimed this teaching. Second, for each manuscript there is the possibility of error, but equally as many manuscripts of which to verify an authentic text. Sure a scribe dropped a "the" in his manuscript, but every other word copied accurately covers other scribes' errors and vice versa. Thirdly, as long as we are talking about authority, find me a single doctrine that finds its sole authoritative basis on a disputed text or book? And I'll even help you out with the real difficult ones: the end of the Gospel of Mark, and the woman caught in adultery in John. Go read them, tell me what part of our faith is ruined if we took them out? And I'll go one further, this is always a scandalous one, those books we are less sure of their authorship or date (and keep in mind these are still MILES better than any other

book in ancient antiquity), but the antilegomena, Hebrews, James, Jude, Revelation. Take them out, and tell me if we lose a resurrection, if we lose a second coming, if we lose the Old Covenant themes, if we lose the law or Gospel. Spoiler alert: we don't. Fourthly, we never say the copyists are without error, we say the scriptures are, the originals, and for all the reasons above, we can be confident the texts we have received are reliable testimonies of them.

I get how attractive one, fallen from heaven, book might be. But that necessitates a private religion. Christianity is not private, it is public. Real events, real people, real eyewitnesses. But make no mistake, there is no telephone game – I had to learn those languages. But don't take my word for it: The Dead Sea Scrolls from two thousand years ago, read the book of Isaiah in them, and then read it in your pew bible, guess what – same thing! And the text is “unreliable”? Please.

Finally, let's bring it back to our text here, this is a sermon after all. Jesus says, himself, that we received his Word! Is he incapable of giving us a received text that can create and sustain true faith? Or have the scribes thwarted his purpose? Is God up there saying, “Shucks. If only spellcheck was around sooner.” Of course not. Jesus says the “scripture cannot be broken,” he says “my sheep know my voice,” he says, again, “you have received and believed my Word.” Is his promise void?

And the cynic again will say – but that is a circular argument, you are saying the Bible is authoritative because the Bible says it is authoritative. And I say, “You got it!” And so when something claims to be authoritative, I guess the only thing to do is look and see if it is. So, If Jesus says his word is true, well don’t listen to a single word of it if he is a liar. But if he isn’t. If say, he said he would die and rise and actually did – why wouldn’t you cherish every single letter, Christian? Every one. Because it is unpopular? Because it is patriarchal or out of touch? “Maybe we should edit it, and make it nicer” – well, then who is making the editorial decisions on what is authoritative now? You are! And you make a God of your own image, which is not a God who can raise the dead. You die. You can’t make yourself alive again, why would you worship a god like you?

No we worship God as he is in reality. I should probably mention we do not worship the Bible – by the way, that is how he reveals himself to us, but he is object of faith, he is the One who saves, and we worship him because he is real. And should we be stuck on an island with no Bibles, or if they all go away, and even before it was compiled. Would the body of Christ, the Church, still know him, still recognize who he is and his truth? Yes, and here we see the beauty of the creeds and the body of believers who could still proclaim a God who is real, who is good, who died and rose for our salvation. And why could we do that? Because we know the shepherds voice, and his Word has taken root in our hearts.

Which is not to say the Word isn't necessary, just the opposite! May it dwell in us richly! May we cherish this gift of God telling us who he is. Because he could have left us, he could have been the divine watchmaker who made creation and left us spinning. He didn't have to reveal himself to us. And we would be left groping in darkness knowing there was a God, this all got here somehow, but then as we see brokenness, suffering, and death, we might have our doubts about how good that God is.

But he has revealed himself to us. And I will spare you all the arguments about how God didn't make evil, it's his absence, and so on and simply point to a cross. God has revealed himself there. In history, in testimony we have received. This is a God of mercy, of love, who thinks of you, sinner, and prays for you before he goes there. And yes, he bids us carry our crosses which isn't fun, or easy, but his word is sure, he does love you, he will give you grace sufficient, and even as he overcame His cross, he has overcome all things and will bring you to know him face to face. Where the Word of God, made flesh, will, with his mighty arm, bring you, forgive and cleansed by his blood, to his victory feast.

Rejoice in that Work and the Word of our God. Amen.