

"How To Read the Bible"

4 Minute Special - February 24, 2002

by Father Brian Joyce

Last week's four minutes was on "What the Bible Is and What It Is Not." Today's four minutes is "How to Read the Bible." It's not easy. It's a big, thick, heavy book. Where do I begin? What translation should I use? How do I get some simple basic homework done?

Step one is to get a good Bible. In today's bulletin, I list some recommended translations, specifically the New American Bible, the New Revised Standard Version, and the Jerusalem Bible. But, they come in many editions, packaged differently by each publisher.

Step two is to get a good study Bible. Once again, some are listed in the Bulletin. They will give you an introduction to each book of the Bible and tell you something about its literary form and history plus some helpful footnotes.

Step three is do not begin at the beginning. The Bible was not written in that order. It's not set up in order of importance, and Bible-reading is not supposed to be a start-to-finish marathon anyway. Here are a few suggestions on where you might begin. You could take the shortest gospel, Mark's gospel, and start there. Or, you could begin with the Acts of the Apostles, which describes the life of the early Church, like us, the people of God, after the death and resurrection of Jesus. For the Old Testament, you could begin with a brief and pointed prophet like Amos. Or you could choose the strong women of the Hebrew scriptures, like Ruth, Esther, and Judith. Or if you want to journey from Abraham to Moses, you could begin with Chapter 12 of Genesis. That's where the historical part begins, and no sooner. Or you could simply move through the Book of Psalms, as your daily prayer book. Some study editions offer a suggested pattern for daily reading.

Since 1969, the Catholic Church has followed a three-year-cycle of readings that take Mass-goers through the entire Bible. Just by paying close attention at Sunday Mass we hear the entire four gospels and most of the rest of the Bible. In fact, the mainline Protestant Churches in the United States have adopted the same basic lectionary because it is such a thorough tour of the Bible.

When we attentively hear the Scripture, almost every passage does three things that are basic and awesome. Number one, the Bible tells us about God. Again and again, it reveals to us something about God. Number two, the Bible tells us about ourselves. Again and again, it reveals something about our own hearts. And, thirdly, the Bible is

always forming us into community, building us as a people in God's spirit and image.

We call it the Word of God. We call it the Word of the Lord. We don't exactly mean each translated phrase on its own and we certainly don't mean the printed page, the paper and the ink. We don't mean so much what lies between the covers of the book as much as what is happening in us when this word is both proclaimed and welcomed. If we listen with our hearts and struggle with our understanding, and allow the Spirit of God to speak to us through the recorded experience of Scripture, then the word of God is alive today and the presence of God is ours. It happens in the midst of a believing community and attentive hearts, or it doesn't happen at all. A friend of mine says that lectors and preachers should not say, "This is the word of the Lord." After each reading, they should look at us and announce, "This could have been the word of the Lord. This just might have been the word of the Lord." The rest is up to us.