

Weekend of the Passion (C/RCL)
April 1, 2007
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

There's a billboard you may have seen if you've been traveling on Route 34 North recently, just before you get to the Allenwood Circle. It shows a giant picture of a Bible, accompanied by the caption, "Educated people read the Bible." It advertises a bible literacy website.

Interestingly, the cover study for the April 2nd edition of *Time Magazine* is, "The Case for Teaching the Bible." It's written by *Time's* senior religion editor, and presents a hefty argument for offering elective Bible literacy classes in public schools. He interviewed a couple teenagers participating in just such a class in a Texas high school. One was a blonde who didn't want her name disclosed because she hasn't broken the news to her parents yet that she considers herself an atheist. Asked why she chose to take this particular class anyway, she answered,

"Some of my friends are Christian and they would argue about, like, whether you can be a Christian and believe in evolution, and I'm like, Okaaaay... clueless." (p. 42)

Another student in the class classifies herself as a believer. She explained she's in the class because:

"If somebody is going to carry on a sophisticated conversation with me, I would rather know what they're talking about than look like a moron or fight my way through it." (p. 42)

These teens are going to be way out front of many adults by the time they finish their course. Here's a little quiz. Take a pen from your purse or pocket, or a pencil from the pew rack in front of you, and jot on the bulletin as many of the four evangelists, writers of the Gospels, as you can remember. [Pause.] Who knows all four? Who are they?

Even if you got one instead of four names correct, you're ahead of most Americans. A Gallup poll showed that only about half of U.S. adults can name even one Gospel. Yet, we're

wise enough to know what we have left to learn, because over 60% of Americans think the Bible should be taught in public schools. People realize that our Western culture is steeped in Scripture. Shakespeare made over 1,300 references to the Bible in his plays. Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., Harriet Beecher Stowe, Gandhi, Churchill, politicians, playwrights, novelists, the brave ones who fought for the abolition of slavery, for women's right to vote, for prison reform and civil rights here and abroad, have all found inspiration for themselves and words to inspire others in the pages of Scripture. The journalist who wrote the *Time* article says that the consensus of the majority of Americans is: regardless of your religious affiliation, "knowledge of [the Bible] is essential to being a full-fledged, well-rounded citizen" (p. 42).

Of course, if the Bible literacy class is taught in a public school rather than in Sunday School or a church-sponsored institution, the expectation is that the teacher presents the Bible "as an object of study, not God's received word." Lectures are "teaching **about** religion," not "teaching **of** religion" (a distinction made in the 1964 Supreme Court decision on *McCullum v. Board of Education*, which outlawed prayer in schools).

In contrast to all of that, we openly and passionately teach our children that the Bible is the Word of Life. I'll be glad if they get to study it from a different angle, Monday through Friday in high school, too, but that would be an added extra. In the meantime, hopefully they're in worship this weekend to hear, "the old, old story, of Jesus and His love" as told in the Passion according to St. Luke. And hopefully they'll be with us on Good Friday as we walk the Way of the Cross, moving from the Last Supper in the Upper Room, to the Mount of Olives where Jesus prayed and the disciples slept, to the courtyard outside the high priest's palace, to Pilate's headquarters, to Herod's guest quarters, back to Pilate again, down the Via Dolorosa (the Sorrowful Way), and onto Calvary.

Our children know where we get the phrases: to be betrayed by a kiss, to sweat blood, to let this cup pass, to have a cross to bear, to wash one's hands of responsibility, to receive 40

lashes. When they sing, “Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom,” they know they were spoken by a thief on a cross before worshipers ever sang them. For them, though, this story isn’t just great literature. This is the greatest story ever told. For them, **Jesus’** story is also **our** story, for this is our salvation history.

Knowing **what** happened makes a person well-informed. Knowing **why** it happened makes the believer grateful. To quote the words of another evangelist, St. John, whose Passion account we will hear on Good Friday evening,

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. John 3.16

Listen again and again to the story. Marvel at God’s goodness. Stand in awe at Jesus’ obedience. Feel for the disciples, who “slept for grief” in the Garden. Cry with Peter, who “wept bitterly” when he realized he had denied His Lord three times. Rankle at Pilate’s unwillingness to displease the crowd. Shake your head at Herod, who wanted to see the Miracleworker up close and personal, and then callously joined in the soldiers’ mockery of Him. Shiver as you hear the crowd cry, “Crucify! Crucify him!” Love the thief who told the other guy to be quiet. Admire Joseph of Arimathea who bravely asked Pilate for Jesus’ body. Hold your breath with the women who shadow Joseph as he lays Jesus’ body in the tomb. Identify with each and every character in the greatest story ever told. Like the people who show up in our dreams, each one symbolizes something within ourselves, either noble or pitiful.

Reading our Bible, we learn there’s no “us and them.” It’s all “us.” For we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Come back on Thursday, and Friday and Saturday nights, to hear again how He gave Himself, body and blood, for each one, how He died on the cross, for each one, how He rose triumphant, for each one. Claim **His** story as **our** story, as **your** story. The greatest and truest story ever told....

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham