

ENGAGING THE GREAT CONVERSATION February 2010

This month, as we engage the Great Conversation, I want to focus on the general topic of scripture. In months to come, we'll consider Paul, and the Gospel writers. But first, this overview. Last month I raised a question of authority. I want to raise it again here. By what authority do you live your life? Who or what authorizes you to live as you do? More precisely, who or what *lives* you, animates you, ensouls you? An easy response among non-Catholic Christians is, "the Bible." But, does it, really?

In the 1st Century CE an awesome thing happened. Some believed it would never happen. Others, I think, hoped it would. And they got their way. The stupendous thing that happened was this: the Jerusalem temple was destroyed by the Romans. Utterly! Completely! Gone!

Why is this event awesome, stupendous? It is awesome, stupendous, because it is akin only to the holocaust of the 20th Century, when Hitler exterminated as many Jews as he could. The thing that authorized the life of Israel and of every Jewish person at the beginning of the 1st Century was not scripture, but the temple and its worship. Without the temple and its worship there could be no Jewish nation nor a Jewish people. Were the temple to disappear so would the nation; so would the people as, later on, the Nazis hoped they would.

Consider today's petroleum-based global economy, our culture's "temple." Some say that without this form of economy and the growth it produces life as we know it would come to an end. Others, though, wish devoutly for its destruction for, if this kind of growth continues, they say, life on and of this planet cannot be sustained. Now, given this conflict, imagine that the global economy crashed abruptly, that it came to as sudden an end as did the temple for the Jews in Jerusalem. What sort of questions would you ask? What questions would others ask? My guess is that we would all be asking some version of the question, "On what, on whom, shall we now base our lives given the calamitous fall of this factor so central, so basic to all that we do or are?" That's the sort of question that Jewish people were asking when the temple, the stack pole of their identity and their reality, was so awesomely, stupendously, utterly, completely, *gone!*

Rabbis, Pharisees, the liberal teachers of the day had an answer. Torah! The scriptures, meaning the Hebrew scriptures, for what we call the New Testament scriptures hadn't even yet appeared on the scene. If the people were to survive as a people, if they were to have an identity, something had to take the place of the temple, now gone forever. Or, someone had to take its place. Can you begin to get a sense of the intellectual and religious and political ferment occurring? Something, perhaps, like listening to Lou Dobbs and Rush Limbaugh and Hannity and Combs and James Dobson and Pat Robertson and... well, maybe you get the picture. The concern, of course, is to get it right! It has to be gotten right they assume, because if it isn't gotten right an entire people, an entire way of being in the world, of living and loving will simply fade into oblivion. And so, the synagogue came into its own: a place and a way to re-order the fractured pieces of Jewish life, not around the temple, but around the *writings*. That's what scripture means: *writings*.

Among those Jewish people trying to make sense of these momentous events were the first *Christian thinkers*. They went to synagogue. They poured over their Hebrew scriptures. They debated, argued, cussed and discussed the scriptures with other Jews who had differing perspectives, *in order to account for the authority by which* they were living their lives. They intended to make a convincing case for the *What and the Who* that they considered to be authorizing them to live as they were living, a way not only no longer characterized by temple worship, not only no longer presided over by priests, not only no longer focused on continuous blood sacrifice, but one that could only be called a *New Covenant*.

Imagine a Holly Wood scenario. In a few brief days preceded, perhaps, by years of anxiety our global petroleum-based economy fails. Awesomely! Stupendously! Utterly! Completely! *Gone!* Mammon (Money), capitalist or otherwise, is revealed to be impotent. The Treasury Building might as well be destroyed, for its worth is no more. What a great movie! But, were it to happen, really, by what authority do you continue? What, Who authorizes your way of life? What, Who lives, *animates* you? Are the writings we call "Scripture" adequate to that task? Is your life, our life, really organized around them?