

Given that today is the Sunday of the Word of God, a special day that the Holy Father declared 2 years ago to be a day of celebration, study, and dissemination of the Word of God, I thought it would be appropriate to dive a little deeper into the First Reading from the Book of the Prophet Jonah and then from there briefly discuss how we as Catholics are to read and interpret the Bible, which is the written, inspired Word of God. I truly believe that while the Bible is the most popular book on earth, it's also the most misunderstood, misinterpreted, and underappreciated book on Earth, and it's really not even a book and I'll get to that a little later.

Now when people hear the story of the Prophet Jonah, which we just heard a little bit of in the First Reading, especially that crazy part about Jonah being swallowed up by the giant fish and being in the belly of the whale for 3 days and 3 nights (a part of the story that was absent from today's reading), people immediately scoff and think that this is a ridiculous story – and then they take their reaction and apply it to the whole Bible as if the entire Bible is a total sham. Well first, it's important to clearly state that the Old Testament Book of Jonah is *not*

trying to an historical account of actual events! Rather the Book of Jonah is *intended* by the human author to be a moral fable, a parable that's centered on a fictional prophet. Written after the Babylonian Exile of the Israelites in the 5th or 4th century BC, the Book of Jonah has been classified as a prophetic satire—a fictional moral tale that's intended to emphasize the all-powerful love and mercy of God, which extends even to the Gentiles (non-Jews) and the pagans. When our Lord Jesus references the story of the Prophet Jonah and his 3 days and 3 nights in the belly of the whale, Christ is not attesting to the story's historicity, but rather He's using the popular fable as a metaphor for His own death and resurrection.

Secondly, there's a peculiar detail in today's First Reading that demands an explanation. We're told in the last line of today's First Reading that, "When God saw by their actions how they turned from their evil way, he *repented of the evil* that he had threatened to do to them; he did not carry it out." Wait what? God "repented of the evil" He was going to carry out? First of all, it's important to note that God has *absolutely no need of repentance* because God is incapable of

committing sin. God is absolute perfection and goodness and so by *His very nature, He cannot sin* for that would totally contrary to who He is. So what's going on here with author's phrase of how "God repented of his evil"? Well this is a perfect example of anthropomorphism, which is a literary device used throughout the Old Testament in which human traits, actions, and characteristics are projected onto God in order to make God more accessible to the audience. Such anthropomorphic language throughout the Old Testament reminded Israel that God is "personal" capable of entering into deep relationship with human beings.

Brothers and sisters, *the Bible is not a book*, but a collection of books. The Bible is essentially like a library. And just as we enter a library and read each book according to its literary genre, so we also reach each book of the Bible according to its literary genre. The 73 books of the Bible belong to many different literary genres: there are Gospels, psalms, allegories, poems, letters, historical books, legal codes, etc. And even within a Biblical book's particular literary genre, there are many other literary and theological elements that we must be mindful of: such as the immediate and overall context and genre of a

particular passage, the author's intention for writing the book, the book's intended historical audience, the historical and cultural context of the book, the circumstances of the author and their audience, linguistic forms and expressions being used in the book, the different senses of Sacred Scripture, etc.

In this context, it's also important to note that we *are not Biblical fundamentalists*, meaning that we don't interpret every single part of the Bible in a rigidly literalistic manner. Rather we read and interpret the Bible according to two key elements: *genre and context*. Whenever we read the Bible, we must *always* pay attention to the genre and context of the scriptural passage in question. Understanding the genre and context of a particular passage will help us to understand the true meaning of the passage in a full and authentic manner.

St. Augustine of Hippo, who's one of the greatest Saints and Doctors of the Church, proposed a principle of biblical interpretation that is truly in accordance with the nature and purpose of the inspired, written Word of God. St. Augustine's principle of biblical interpretation may be called, "The Rule of Love" and in his classic work *On Christian*

Doctrine, St. Augustine explained it as the following: “Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this ***twofold love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought.***” In other words, St. Augustine is saying that if we interpret the Bible or a particular Biblical passage in a way that ***contradicts the love of God and neighbor***, then we are seriously misreading and misinterpreting the Bible. If our interpretation of Scripture does not result in the love of God and neighbor, then we have not understood the Scriptures correctly. So for example, if I come away after reading the Bible thinking that God is an evil monster or that I should sin against my neighbor or do evil to others, then I am fundamentally misreading and misinterpreting the Bible.

Brothers and sisters, since it was the Christ’s Catholic Church who, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, compiled the Bible in its entirety over the centuries after Pentecost, we must ***always*** read and interpret the Bible in light of Christ and the teachings of His Catholic Church. It’s important for people to know and understand that in chronological time

and history, our Lord Jesus Christ and His Catholic Church existed *prior to the Bible*.

I'm not talking about just the 46 books of the Old Testament, which obviously preceded Christ and the Church in history, I'm talking about the entire Bible as it is today, all 73 books, 46 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. *The only reason the Bible exists at all is because of Christ and His Church*, which determined the official canon of the Bible in various church councils and synods of the 4th century AD, the first of which was the Synod of Rome in 382 AD. And so the bottom line is that *ultimately*, when we read the Bible, we should read and interpret the Bible in light of Christ and the Magisterial teachings of His Catholic Church.

Brothers and sisters, *our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is the ultimate interpretive key to the Bible*. He is the Word of God Incarnate—the Word made flesh! And in fact, when we consider the primacy and centrality of Christ our Savior, *we call to mind the foundational truth that we are not a religion of a book*—rather our religion is based *entirely on a Person* and that Person is our Lord Jesus

Christ, the Word of God incarnate. And so whenever we read Sacred Scripture, which is the written, inspired Word of God in the words of human beings, we must always keep Christ front and center of our minds and hearts, knowing that He is the ultimate interpretive key to understanding all of the Scriptures. And if we read the Scriptures with the heart and mind of the Church, then we will be led into a deeper personal relationship with Christ.

St. Jerome said very eloquently, “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.” As Catholics, do we read the Bible? Do we regularly pray over the inspired Word of God? Or do we neglect what God wants to say to us and teach us through Sacred Scripture? Brothers and sisters, through the Bible, through His written, inspired Word, God speaks directly to us in our personal situations and circumstances.

-Fr. Mike Schmitz’s ‘Bible in a Year’ is #1 podcast on Apple charts — 5th day running

-Magnificat as a daily devotional – Scripture, Tradition and the Saints

-Parish website – non-exhaustive list great Catholics Bibles, study
Bibles, and books on the Bible.