

PROMISES MADE, PROMISES KEPT

Very Reverend Glenn Jones

Vicar General, Vicar for Clergy, Vicar for Religious

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New York bishop Fulton Sheen had a very popular television show back in the 1950s called “Life is Worth Living,” in which he expounded on the Christian—more specifically, the Catholic—faith. One of his more famous phrases was, “There are not one hundred people in the United States who hate The Catholic Church, but there are millions who hate what they wrongly perceive the Catholic Church to be.” Unfortunately, with the increased secularization of society and the embracing of some values that are opposed—sometimes diametrically—to Christian beliefs, both of those numbers may have grown over the years.

But the main thing that keeps many people from faith is not the difficulty of fidelity (Christians ARE called to self-control, after all) or even church scandals, but rather simply not being convinced of the *truth* of Christianity and the existence of God.

One of the main reasons for this is that so many distractions keep them from *investigating* the Christian faith. Because investigation takes time—time away from all those things that give immediate, though fleeting, and—in the end—often empty gratification. How many episodes of this or that show can we watch, after all? Or YouTube videos? Or hours perusing social media? All of these give us plenty of entertainment, but not a whole lot of knowledge.

Kids often don’t want to learn because it isn’t immediately “fun,” or they don’t see the immediate applicability or importance. Some teachers tell me that kids because they’re on their phones or other devices all day/every day, look vacantly at them while they’re trying to teach. It’s no wonder that overall test scores in our nation have dropped.

But like anything of worthwhile and long-lasting (in this case, eternal) applicability, an investment of *time* is required. The greater the importance, the greater the investment needed; in the case of faith, a lifetime. Of course, we adults can be the same way. It’s funner and easier on Sunday morning to sleep in than to stumble into the shower, round up the kids, and head to church to listen to Father’s boring hour-long homily. “Oh, it wasn’t an hour? Seemed that long! What did he talk about anyway?”

But in our Mass reading for this Sunday (March 16) are things that point to the truth of God and His promises...if we only take the time to consider them. I’ve discussed this in previous columns, but as the saying goes: *Repetition is the mother of learning.*

We read about Abram at the very beginning of monotheism in Genesis 15. Abram lived about 1800-2000 BC—almost 4000 years ago—and our reading recounts the covenant that God made with Abram, promising descendants like the “stars of the sky”—poetically saying “extremely numerous.” But at the time, Abram had no children, and it didn’t seem like he was going to. His wife Sarai (meaning “princess”) was barren, and apparently, they couldn’t have children.

But scripture says: “Abram put his faith in the LORD, who credited it to him as an act of righteousness.”

According to the story, even 15 years later, Abram and Sarai remained childless, but Abram never loses faith. God eventually fulfills his promise: Sarah has a son, Isaac—her only child.

One kid is not exactly “like the stars in the sky,” but as Paul Harvey used to say, there’s more to the story.

From Isaac would come Jacob, and from Jacob comes all the Israelites ... and eventually Mary, then Jesus. And from Jesus would come literally billions of not bodily, but spiritual descendants of Abraham, who is called “Our father in faith.”

Professor Carl Sagan used to say of the cosmos in his documentaries that there are “billions and billions of stars.” And now Abram (Abraham) has billions of *spiritual* descendants, for St. Paul

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writes: "...not all are children of Abraham because they are his [physical] descendants; but [God promised] 'Through Isaac shall your descendants be named.' This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned as descendants. (Romans 9:7-8)

So, think about it. The book of Genesis was first compiled from oral tradition, likely written down around the time of King David—around 1000 BC—3000-ish years ago. Israel—even under Kings David and Solomon—was a tiny nation, certainly nothing compared to the Roman empire, or the Macedonians under Alexander, or definitely not like the Mongol Empire under Genghis Khan. And yet, what was written 3000 years ago has come to pass more spectacularly than anyone could ever have imagined. A promise of God realized for all to see. Worldwide.

Then consider that, several hundred years after Kings David and Solomon, the Israelites were almost completely wiped out by wars and conquest, leaving only a tiny remnant to survive and be taken as slaves to Babylon. And yet, even with *that*, Abraham's spiritual descendants—through Jesus—have grown to be in the literal billions. Taught by whom the world would see as just a ragged, lowly, wandering carpenter.

This is simply one of the available examples of the surety and veracity of the Christian faith; so many others are evident if one only looks. And as we well know, our time on earth is so very short. So what could be more important than to know and live the truth so as to live with God forever after this life is done? If you've not done so, investigate the evidence left for us, and you may also be able to make that short leap of faith to belief.