

Proverbs 1:1-7, 20-33

St. Ephrem the Syrian Commentary (4th century) on the Diatessaron (ca. 172)

By Renee Valenzuela, OP 2/17/2019

The Diatessaron, Latin for “made of four ingredients,” is an early church writing that combined the four Gospels into a single narrative. It was composed by Tatian, a pupil of Justin Martyr, circa 170, and was used as the standard Gospel for at least some of the Church in Syria. In the fifth century, the Diatessaron was replaced by the canonical four Gospels, by Theodoret bishop of Cyrrhus of the Euphrates. Suspecting that the work was heretical, he collected more than 200 copies of the Diatessaron and locked them away. St. Ephrem of Syria, an early Church Doctor, wrote commentaries on many books of the Bible, including the Diatessaron in the fourth century. This work was translated from the original Syriac in the middle ages, circa 892, and nearly no full text documents are known to exist from St. Ephrem. Interestingly, about half of his Syriac writings were rediscovered in a manuscript in 1957 and ultimately denounced a widely held and long-time belief that Tatian’s Diatessaron was heresy.

In our reading of Proverbs today, five of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are specifically mentioned: Wisdom, Understanding, Knowledge, Fear of the Lord, and Counsel. He says that even wise men can advance their learning and intelligent men will gain sound guidance, comprehend proverb and parable, the words of the wise and their riddles.

These gifts from the spirit are gratuitously given to us at our baptism and strengthened at our confirmation. We should pray often for an increase in these gifts and the fortitude to employ them for the benefit of our brothers and sisters in Christ. These gifts are essential equipment for us to use as we navigate through the world. They also enable us to help our neighbor along the way by relating Jesus’ teachings to our modern lives. We could not do this without these gifts because we would not know God as we do. We could not have a relationship with him without knowing him, without understanding his goodness, his mercy, and his lessons.

We are reminded by Solomon that, “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” A healthy fear of the Lord ought to be the foundation of our knowledge. As such, all that we learn is understood with God, our Creator, in mind. Our attention is then turned rightly to God to give thanks each time we discover something new. Nearly 1000 years later, St. Ephrem reiterates this in our reading today from his commentary on the Diatessaron. He tells us that God’s word offers different facets according to the capacity of the listener. This could even relate to the same listener at various times in his own life. There are multiple levels of understanding in the gospels. We don’t need to understand all levels at once. He explains that it does not require emptying the well to sate the thirsty, nor should it require knowing all to sate the curious.

The word of God truly is our spiritual food and drink, and it’s wellspring is infinitely deep. It’s easy for us to overwhelm ourselves with so vast a wellspring of knowledge to gain. We ought to keep clear from the temptation to be overwhelmed. God does not expect us to know everything. He expects us to live well what we know. As Jesus promised his apostles, the Holy Spirit will reveal to us all that we should know, and it is our free will to live it.

As we progress in our Formation let us not fall to this temptation to be overwhelmed by all there is to learn. Let us do as St. Ephrem urges us, “Be thankful then for what you have received, and do not be saddened at all that such an abundance still remains. What you have received and attained is your present share, while what is left will be your heritage.”