

Christ is risen. Alleluia.

In the name of ✠ Jesus. Amen.

It's been a while since I've used Star Trek as an illustration — I'm going to today. Sorry about that for you unfamiliar with it. For you Star Trek fans, it's a Next Generation episode.

This Gospel text reminded me of this episode where Captain Picard had to learn to communicate with a race of space-going beings, the Tamarians, that communicated exclusively using metaphors. “Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra,” the opposing captain said to Picard, referring to some perhaps mythical, perhaps historical alliance that happened between two adversaries on his home world. It made no sense to Picard at first. But through the show, he learned to understand some of the metaphors. He learned how to communicate — and in this way, war was averted.

In our Gospel, Jesus admits: he uses figurative language: *“I have said these things to you in figures of speech.”* It turns out that much of the Bible contains metaphors. Consider, for example, when the Lord through the prophet Isaiah speaks of Israel as a vineyard that He has planted with choice vines, yet it yielded only bad fruit (Isa. 5).

Of course, figurative language often hides the meaning. There is an underlying meaning in the text. In this particular example, the Lord goes on to explain the meaning: *“the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry”* (Isa. 5:7)!

Or consider how the Psalmist talks about *“the man [whose] delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.”* *“He is like a tree,”* the Psalmist continues, *“planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers”* (Ps. 1:1-2). In this case, the metaphor, specifically the simile, helps illustrate the blessedness of the one who drinks of God's word.

Jesus says He uses figures of speech. As you think about it, you might say: “Of course, He does.” The parables are figures of speech. When you hear Jesus say, *“The kingdom of heaven is like ...,”* you know He's using figurative language. The dictionary says a parable is “usually [a] short fictitious story that illustrates a moral attitude or a religious principle,” but Jesus' parables are not always easy to figure out. You know that there is some meaning hidden in the story, and we're often glad when the disciples asked Jesus to explain the parables to them. In fact, Jesus taught using parables to hide His true meaning from the undiscerning. He

said, “*This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand*” (Matt. 13:13).

In today's Gospel, Jesus also tells the disciples, “*The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father.*” So sometimes Jesus speaks in figures of speech, and other times not.

Therefore, like Picard, in my illustration, had to understand the metaphorical language of the Tamarians, so when we read the Bible, we need to understand the kind of literature we are reading to understand correctly what God is saying. It's called the *sensus literalis*, not a literal reading of the words (literal here as the dictionary defines it: “taking words in their usual or most basic sense without metaphor or allegory”), but the intended sense. So, it makes a difference whether one is reading a historical event like the crucifixion or one of Jesus' parables; it makes a difference whether one is reading a prophetic book or one of Paul's epistles.

Some of the Missouri Synod's scholars of the 1950s and 60s were teaching in a way that imposed a foreign sense upon the Biblical text, one that conformed to their sensibilities. They believed the evolutionists, so the world wasn't made in six days, Moses was speaking poetically, and Adam and Eve became mythical. It was just unbelievable that the Red Sea could be parted, so it was some natural phenomenon that dried up not the Red Sea but the Sea of Reeds, according to these scholars. Of course, no one could survive being eaten by a fish, so that didn't happen literally. And no one rises from the dead, so that story must have been made up for some other purpose.

It's this kind of thinking and teaching that caused all the turmoil in the Synod that led to the big 1974 walkout. Some of those scholars thought they knew better than Moses, better than Jesus, better than the eye-witnesses, better than the Spirit. It's this kind of scholarship still today that leads to a denial of the very things that make us Christian, as the Adult Bible Class considered recently. Can you be a Christian and not believe in the Virgin Birth? Not believe in Jesus' crucifixion as a sacrifice of atonement? Not believe in Jesus' bodily resurrection? Not believe in heaven or hell? Those were the opinions of a scholar from Union Theological Seminary in New York City. The Bible class concluded: she was no Christian (Opinion | “Reverend, You Say the Virgin Birth Is ‘a Bizarre Claim’?” Nicholas Kristoff, The New York Times, April 20, 2019).

Christians take the Bible seriously, and don't dismiss it out-of-hand. That means, when we read the book of Revelation, we consider that John was trying to describe what he saw as he was “*carried away in the Spirit*”—lots of images, like the holy city of Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. Or when Jesus, shortly before our text tells the disciples, “*I am the vine; you are the branches,*” He's clearly using figurative speech that needs some explanation. And we're glad that

Jesus goes on to explain: “*Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing*” (John 15:5).

But Jesus also speaks plainly to the disciples and us about who He is and what He came to do. Indeed, He speaks plainly on this night when He was betrayed. He tells us plainly that He came from the Father and came into this world. He is the only-begotten Son of God who received mortal flesh in the womb of the Blessed Virgin. Jesus is using plain incarnation language.

Jesus tells us plainly that He will be leaving the world and returning to the Father. That is, having accomplished all that He came to do—namely “*overcoming the world,*” having defeated our enemies—sin and death and Satan, Jesus would ascend back to the Father to sit again at the Father’s right hand. And although He didn’t say it here, on more than one occasion He spoke it plainly to the disciples: He’s going to suffer, die, and rise again. St. Mark even emphasizes it: “*he said this plainly*” (Mark 8:32). Plain crucifixion language.

On the other hand, when John talks in Revelation of the Lamb, and in particular, “*the Lamb who was slain*” (Rev. 5:12), that’s figurative language that points us to the glorious words of St. John the Baptist, who tells us in figurative language what this crucifixion means: Jesus was that perfect sacrifice of “*the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world*” (John 1:29).

So, certainly the Bible contains figurative language, but when it comes to the resurrection of Jesus, the Bible speaks plainly of these historical facts: the tomb was empty; Jesus’ dead body wasn’t there; He was raised from the dead, living again. The Bible speaks plainly and clearly: Jesus appeared in the flesh to His disciples, talking with them, eating with them, letting them touch Him, all before He would leave this world and ascend to the Father. Plain resurrection language.

Surely Jesus spoke plainly, too, earlier in the evening as He offered up His Last Will and Testament to the Church. When Jesus said, “*This is my body,*” and “*This is my blood of the New Testament,*” He wasn’t using figures of speech; He meant what He said. He gives us His very own body and blood, offered up on the cross, for our forgiveness, life and salvation. That’s what you receive today, not a symbol, but the real thing.

Dear saints, God speaks to us through His Word; it’s important. Sometimes He does in figurative language and sometimes speaking plainly. Regardless, hold fast to these words of Moses, of the prophets, of the evangelists, of the apostles— they are spirit and they are life.

Pray that as you read God’s word the Holy Spirit would clarify this word, illumine your hearts and minds, and strengthen your faith. For some of it is hard—

what is written in figurative language, for example. You may not understand it, at first. But as in that Star Trek episode, Picard came more and more to understand a seemingly indecipherable language the more he engaged with it, so, as we engage more and more with God's word, with the Spirit's help, we will come to understand it better—both the figurative language and the plain talk. We will be strengthened in our faith, so that in a world filled with tribulation, we will find peace in Jesus Christ, who has overcome the world and has given us His victory.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Christ is risen! Alleluia!