

Bible has images that influence our moral lives



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

ances with the use of military force." Or did he miss it when Colin Powell said Friday that the United Nations "must not walk away" from backing a war against Iraq, despite inspectors' claims that Saddam Hussein has made steps toward cooperating with the world body.

**Roger Jestel
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Comments about war urge thought

To the editor:

I read with great interest the letter "Conservative finds church unwelcoming" (March 13). In response I would like to offer a couple of suggestions.

First, the immediate issue of concern appears to be the writer's support of the US attack on Iraq, rather than the "left" or "right" of the political arena. Recent *Courier* articles have been attempts by Church leaders — well versed in moral theology — to articulate their personal thought processes as they struggled to form an opinion on this complex issue of war. Nowhere did I read that anyone would be "doomed to ... hell" for

reaching a different conclusion. Often such articulation is, in part, for the express purpose of generating thoughtful and well informed discussion. Rarely do any of us have what might at times be seen as the luxury of believing everything we hear from any source. Using the pulpit or the paper as a method of provoking thought is a very far cry from forcing political dogma in the name of religion.

The secondary issue seems to be the incursion of the Church into "politics." Before discussing that, I would urge some careful and prayerful reading of the Gospels, and consideration of the history and Tradition of the Church through the last 2000 years. What was Jesus' relationship/reaction to the political structure of his day? What has been the result of the Church's non-involvement with war in the past? What makes a person a "Genuine Christian?"

I believe we are privileged to be part of the Church in one of the most embracing, most welcoming periods of its history. Informed dialogue among people ready to consider all points of view will only enrich us all.

**Martha Tolon
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I'm teaching a course in which the students insist that the major contribution of the Bible to our moral lives comes in the form of laws, rules and principles. I insist that the primary influence of Scripture in our moral lives is to teach us how to relate to God. I think of Scripture as primarily offering itself as a "tutor" for our emotions. Our emotions, in turn, become vehicles for relating to God.

A parallel is thinking about how children learn to think and talk. They must first come in contact with language and then learn, step by step, to build phrases and sentences. In the "language" of prayer and relating to God, we need first to come into contact with a community that offers us the vocabulary of prayer. For Christians, the foundational language comes to us in the form of images we take from the Bible.

Jesus, as a reverent Jew, was trained in the images of the Psalms. From this language he took images such as these: "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." Those words evoke emotions in us: confidence and trust in God, gratitude, and humble admission of our constant need for the gracious other who does not rush to anger against us.

From the repetition of the Psalms, we develop a powerful sense of God as our protection against threat as we are invited to consider



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The Moral Life

images of God delivering us from "the snare of the fowler" and covering us under wings like an eagle. Who is not comforted and encouraged knowing that our God becomes for us the deliverer from all present and future dangers?

These Psalm passages, and the countless New Testament stories of Jesus healing, calling his disciples, fishing for breakfast and carrying his cross, offer us a range of images that become the very language we use to address God. Garret Green has written that "Scriptures are not something we look at but rather look through, lenses that focus what we see into an intelligible pattern." William Spohn has written, "Scripture is not something we pray about but rather pray through, images that help us enter into conversation with the living God."

The images of Scripture first seize our emotions and then provide us with a "lens" through which to see the world around us and to relate to God. They are far more powerful in shaping

our moral lives than even the catalogues of rules that are so prevalent throughout Scripture.

For example, nearly all of my life, I can recall feeling a kind of "moral tug" whenever I see a vehicle broken down at the side of the road or encounter a hitchhiker. I always suppose that the people involved have some sort of claim on me, and that I should stop my own transit to offer help.

This sense is always a mystery to me, since I am not otherwise given to such moral sensitivity. After some reflection, I admit that the moral tug is the result of having heard the story of the Good Samaritan. It is the image of that traveler stopping to aid a fellow traveler in distress that came to shape the way I "see" the world.

The Bible offers us a storehouse of images that become lenses for us to see the world. They offer us photos of God and the vocabulary to pray and converse with God. It is these actions — learning to view the world, learning to converse with God, learning what God looks and acts like — that are the most important foundation for our moral lives. Cultivating a sense that lets the images of Scripture "work on us" to become sensitive to God in this way is a real cornerstone to our spiritual growth.

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