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Study Group on the Book of Judith

These were the notes distributed for the weekly Study Group on Zoom held during May and June 2021. Hopefully they will be useful for you to read at home by yourself and as a basis for discussion with those with whom you live. Significant quotations from the Biblical text were provided for the group but are not reproduced here because of copyright and production considerations. This booklet should be read alongside a copy of the Book of Judith. In the Study Group we used the NRSV Anglicised Catholic edition of the Bible.

Session 1 ~ p.2

Session 2 ~ p.5

Session 3 ~ p.7

Session 4 ~ p.8

Session 5 ~ p.10

Session 6 ~ p.11

Session 7 ~ p.14

Session 1 - An Introduction

Deuterocanonical Books

Hopefully you've got a Bible with all the books in. If so, it will usually say something like "with Apocrypha" or "with Deuterocanonical Books" on the front cover.

The Canon of Scripture is the name given to the books that are decreed by the Church to have the unique authority given to Scripture (II Timothy 3:16). The list was not universally or clearly articulated at Early Church councils and this contributes to the differences today. The Council of Florence (1441) was very late in doing so.

The seven Deuterocanonical books are Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, I & II Maccabees. There are also Deuterocanonical additions to the books of Esther and Daniel. There is no real clear difference between these books and those undisputed Old Testament books except maybe the Deuterocanonical books are written up to a hundred years later. The Deuterocanonical books do not have Hebrew originals but this is also true of most of the book of Ezra and some parts of Daniel.

There is no agreement as to which books the Jews of the first century AD believed to be canonical. Indeed there may have been no such discussions until Christianity appeared.

The list of New Testament books is shared by all Christian denominations.

The Church of England in her important post-Reformation documents asserted:

"VI. Of the Sufficiency of Holy Scriptures for Salvation.

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. In the name of the holy Scripture we do understand those Canonical Books of the Old and New Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church."

The Article then goes on to list the 39 books of the Old Testament and the 27 of the New. It then continues, referring to the Deuterocanonical books:

“And the other Books (as *Hierome* saith) the Church doth read for example of life and instruction of manners; but yet doth it not apply them to establish any doctrine.”

Traditionally the King James Bible printed the Deuterocanonical books from 1611 onwards but often these are now omitted sadly.

Origin of the Book of Judith

Probably written around 150BC in Palestine by a Jew.

It's not necessarily a historical account but is a didactic story (with a meaning).

Judith as part of the Church's Tradition

Hanukkah is kept at the end of November/early December as the Festival of Lights, commemorating the rededication of the Second Temple. The Feast began in 165 BC, ordered by Judas Maccabeus to celebrate his victory over Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who had desecrated the Temple (I Maccabees 4; II Maccabees 10). It quickly became a feast where candles are lit for eight days. An early tradition records Judas Maccabeus entered the Temple and found a small pot of oil, only enough for a day, which miraculously lasted for eight days. The menorah (nine branched candlestick) is lit for this celebration. Judith dates from around this time and used to be heavily associated with the celebrations.

The book is not in the old Jewish canon but was read by the Jews (eg. at Hanukkah as above).

St Jerome (347-420) records it was read in Church but didn't think it was canonical. In his Preface to the book he wrote: “Receive the widow Judith, example of chastity, and with triumphant praise acclaim her with eternal public celebration. For not only for women, but even for men, she has been given as a model by the one who rewards her chastity, who has ascribed to her such virtue that she conquered the unconquered among humanity, and surmounted the insurmountable.”

St Ambrose (d.397), (On the Duties of the Clergy Book III, Chapter 13) : “See! Judith presents herself to thee as worthy of admiration. She

approaches Holofernes, a man feared by the people, and surrounded by the victorious troops of the Assyrians. At first she makes an impression on him by the grace of her form and the beauty of her countenance. Then she entraps him by the refinement of her speech. Her first triumph was that she returned from the tent of the enemy with her purity unspotted. Her second, that she gained a victory over a man, and put to flight the people by her counsel.

“The Persians were terrified at her daring. And so what is admired in the case of those two Pythagoreans deserves also in her case our admiration, for she trembled not at the danger of death, nor even at the danger her modesty was in, which is a matter of greater concern to good women. She feared not the blow of one scoundrel, nor even the weapons of a whole army. She, a woman, stood between the lines of the combatants—right amidst victorious arms—heedless of death. As one looks at her overwhelming danger, one would say she went out to die; as one looks at her faith, one says she went but out to fight.

“Judith then followed the call of virtue, and as she follows that, she wins great benefits. It was virtuous to prevent the people of the Lord from giving themselves up to the heathen; to prevent them from betraying their native rites and mysteries, or from yielding up their consecrated virgins, their venerable widows, and modest matrons to barbarian impurity, or from ending the siege by a surrender. It was virtuous for her to be willing to encounter danger on behalf of all, so as to deliver all from danger.

“How great must have been the power of her virtue, that she, a woman, should claim to give counsel on the chiefest matters and not leave it in the hands of the leaders of the people! How great, again, the power of her virtue to reckon for certain upon God to help her! How great her grace to find His help!”

In art

See paintings by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1530), Artemisia Gentileschi (1614) and Christoforo Allori (d.1621), all focusing on the decapitation of Holofernes. Earlier depictions emphasised her virtue. Gustav Klimt (d.1918) has produced more modern versions, including the one on the front cover of this booklet. Kehinde Wiley (b.1977), in his series *An Economy of Grace*, included a depiction of Judith too.

A little known oratorio was written in 1761 by Thomas Arne.

Who was Nebuchadnezzar II?

Reigned 605-562BC. Nebuchadnezzar was known as a successful general before he became King and then quickly asserted his authority and the military prowess of Babylon once his father had died. He captured Jerusalem in 597, replacing Jehoiakin with his uncle Zedekiah. He is the key bad guy in Jeremiah, Daniel, II Kings, II Chronicles and in nearly all the Deuterocanonical works, including Judith.

It's possible that this isn't the Nebuchadnezzar in the Book of Judith, who might actually be one of the later ones who reigned in the 520s BC.

Session 2 : Chapters 1 - 3 : Nebuchadnezzar attacks

Spiritual Defences

We hear of the people of Ecbatana building defences to protect themselves from Nebuchadnezzar. We're used to the concept of protections for our home (locks, doors, alarms, asking others to keep an eye out). We also often have emotional defences (friends, not getting ourselves in to situations, learning from mistakes).

Consider What spiritual defences do we have which protect ourselves?

Fr Morris found a useful acronym online:

- C for *Christ's* name (the name of Jesus Christ proclaims His victory)
- O for *obedience* (obedience to God confounds the disobedient one)
- N for *not mine*, but God's will (our yes to God releases grace)
- Q for *Queen Mother* (Mary crushes the head of the serpent)
- U for *union* with Christ (Holy Communion binds us to Christ)
- E for *evangelical poverty* (renunciation of honour, riches, sensual pleasure)
- R for *reconciliation* (healing mercy)
- O for *ordered life* (life ordered to Christ becomes spiritual armour)
- R for *reject Satan* (resist the devil and he will flee; do what the devil does not want)

St Michael the Archangel is described as the great defender of God's people (Daniel 12:1 but see also Revelation 12:7-8). Part of a prayer to St Michael goes: "O glorious Archangel St Michael, watch over us during life, defend us against the assaults of the demon, assist us especially at the hour of death; obtain for us a favourable judgment, and the happiness of beholding God face to face for endless ages. Amen."

The Sign of the Cross is also a means of protecting ourselves. We make this using our right hand and touching our forehead, our stomach, left shoulder and then right shoulder. We can fill the day with Crosses: before and after meals, before journeys, when we pass churches, when we're at Mass, when we see a coffin passing us. It is also permissible and a lovely practice for parents to make the sign of the Cross on children at these times. In Galatians 6:14, St Paul reminds us: "May I never boast of anything except the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world."

Consider: When are you more likely to sin? What do you do to defend yourself from that temptation? Ask yourself regularly what state your defences are in.

Just War

The Sixth Commandment is "You shall not kill," (Exodus 20:13). We must avoid war.

The Church has long taught, however, that it is permissible for those who lead the nations of the world to defend themselves and others by military force as long as:

- the threat is great;
- that other solutions to the problem have been exhausted;
- that the aims are achievable;
- the response must be proportionate.

It is also held by the Church that individuals can object for conscientious reasons to serve in the armed forces but they are obliged to serve the community in some other way. (For all this, see *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §§2307-2310).

Consider: What recent wars have there been? Have they been just? What response can Christians make in these situations?

Session 3 : Chapters 4 - 6 : Judea's Response

The history of the Jews as in Chapter 5

Chapter 5 sees Achior providing the background for the people of God. How does it compare with what else we know?

In Genesis 11, Abram is introduced as a son of Terah and married to Sarai. "They went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah were two hundred and give years; and Terah died in Haran." There in Haran, Abram receives the call of God and is told, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make you r name read, so that you will be a blessing" (Genesis 12:2). We're given no further details.

Ur is in Mesopotamia, as referred to by Achior in 5:7, and he says they fled there because they were struggling to be faithful to God. Josephus, an important Jewish historian of Jesus' time, refers to Abraham as discovering before arriving in Canaan that there was only one God. Josephus' account agrees with Achior's in this chapter, that Abram faced problems from the Chaldeans and the Mesopotamians.

v.10 refers to the events in Genesis 46 following the reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers, the sons of Jacob.

vv.11-16 refers to the events in Exodus, Numbers, and Joshua.

v.18 summarises the apostasy under the Kings of Israel, leading to the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar II.

Achior is positing the rewards of faithfulness. In Romans 2:6-11, St Paul speaks of rewards. The meritorious actions do not justify the individual in the sight of God but are indicators of the justification of God at work in them and of their cooperation with Him.

Consider Why is it useful to know the history of God's interaction with people in the past? Can you do more to record God's interaction with you so others can delight in that record?

Fasting

We see periods of fasting in the Bible, accompanied by prayer and a sorrow for sin (eg. Acts 14:23, Ezra 8:21-23, Jonah 3:10). Jesus talks about three signs of our faith in St Matthew 6: giving alms, praying and fasting. He gives guidelines on them, assuming they are a part of the life of His followers.

Lent is the period when the Church calls upon Christians to imitate the forty days in the Wilderness of our Lord (St Matthew 4:1-11).

In the instances cited above, fasting accompanies divine revelation, which is why the earliest Christians started receiving Holy Communion when they were fasting. We are therefore also called upon to fast from food and drink for at least an hour before receiving Holy Communion. An exception is made for medicine and water. The frail are also exempt.

Fridays are days of abstinence in commemoration of the Cross, save when those Fridays are kept as a great feast (eg. the Sacred Heart, usually in June). The fasting is not to deter us from our usual duties: we should put oil on our faces and go around as normal (Matthew 6:17). We are not bound by customs we see in other religions concerning fasting during daylight hours only.

Consider When do you fast? Do you have any questions about it? What benefits have you felt in your spiritual journey through fasting?

Session 4 : Chapters 7 - 8 : Judith introduced

Notes to Chapter 8

- Judith means Jewess
- Her ancestry is the longest given to a woman in the Old Testament and links her to Jacob. His son Sarasadai is listed in Number 1:6 (note spellings vary).
- Judith and her husband are Simeonites. The people of God were encouraged to marry within their own tribe.
- Manasseh's death by sunstroke was in late Spring.
- Widowhood was a calling and not just a consequence of the death of her husband. We see such a call being pursued by Anna in Luke 2 too.

- The physical appearance of other matriarchs is also noted (see Sarah in Genesis 12:11, Leah and Rachel in Genesis 29:17)
- v.13 Putting God to the test is condemned elsewhere, see St Luke 4:12, quoting Deuteronomy 6:16 ~ “Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah.”
- v.14 I Corinthians 2:11 ~ “For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God’s except the Spirit of God.”
- v.19 Judith returns to the subject of the history of Israel, as Achior had done in the previous chapter. Jerusalem was destroyed, she argues, as a consequence of their apostasy.
- v.30 Uzziah blames the people.
- v.33 we never learn the name of the maid but she appears a few times as a companion
- v.33 Judith promises victory “by my hand.” Literally it will be her hands that do the deed and reference is made to them several times. It is also reminiscent of the salvation wrought by Moses, eg. “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Stretch out your hand towards Heaven so that hail may fall on the whole land of Egypt,’” (Exodus 9:22). It is by outstretching Moses’ hand over the Red Sea that God parts the Red Sea (Exodus 14:16).

Consider Note Judith’s tactic in changing their minds is pointing out the consequences of surrendering. This is a bold speech but with a simple and irrefutable message. Often our arguments about what is right or wrong comes down to authority. People can dispute the authority we give to certain statements and so sometimes it is best to be able explain what the consequences of those actions.

Punishment as a sign of favour

In 8:26 Judith refers to the trials of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Abraham had to leave his home and kindred, wait for decades for the promise to be fulfilled that he would have a son, endure circumcision aged 99, and was asked to sacrifice his son Isaac. Isaac too is childless for a while, faced animosity with Esau and his Hittite wives, and his eyesight deteriorated. Jacob is tested in his loyalty to Laban and the initially childless relationship with Rachel.

In 8:27, Judith refers to an understanding of our relationship with God which necessitates suffering and being reprimanded by His fatherly concern. See also Deuteronomy 8:5 "Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so the Lord your God disciplines you." See also Proverbs 3:11-12, Psalm 94:12 and Hebrews 12:7-11.

Consider Is being scolded an essential element of childhood and do we appreciate that when we consider our lot in life as God's children?

Session 5 : Chapters 9 - 10 : Judith's Campaign

Notes to Chapter 9

- v.1 Incense was offered in the Temple in Jerusalem twice a day.
- v.2 Simeon, the son of Jacob, features in Genesis 34. His sister Dinah was raped by the leader of the Shechemites. Judith sees herself as following Simeon's steps in exacting revenge with deceit (see v.10) and a sword. Note there is no justification for revenge in the morality ushered in by our Lord Jesus Christ (see St Matthew 5:43-48).
- v.8 A horn was placed on each corner of an altar.
- vv.7 & 11 have echoes of the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15:2-3 "The Lord is my strength and my might, and He has become my salvation; this is my God and I will praise Him, my father's God, and I will exalt Him. The Lord is a warrior; the Lord is His name." This is sung by Moses and the Israelites as they walk through the Red Sea, escaping Pharaoh.

Notes to Chapter 10

- v.12 Here is the deceit: Judith says she is abandoning her people.
- v.17ff Judith has them eating out of her hands!
- v.21 Note the splendour of Holofernes' tent cf the simplicity of Judith's.

Use of beauty

Elsewhere in the Bible, Queen Esther uses her beauty to gain admission to the presence of King Ahasuerus/Artaxerxes and plead for her people (the Hebrews) who are threatened with extinction spearheaded by Haman, the

King's advisor. Elsewhere Saul is described as a handsome young man (1 Samuel 9:2) and Joseph's good looks are brought to our attention (Genesis 39:6). Notice we're not told the physical beauty of anyone in the New Testament. Does this surprise us?

God of the lowly

The hymn "Brightest and Best" goes:

Vainly we offer each ample oblation,
Vainly with gifts would His favour secure;
Richer by far is the heart's adoration,
Dearer to God are the prayers of the poor.

We might think too of Our Lady's words in her song, the Magnificat, which we say at Evening Prayer each day: "He has looked with favour on the lowliness of His servant ... He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly," (St Luke 1:51-52).

Consider How do we make sure the poor and the lowly are always welcome in our churches?

Are lies ever justified?

The Ninth Commandment is "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour" (Exodus 20:17). The devil is identified as the father of lies (St John 8:44) whereas Christ is the Truth (St John 14:6).

Consider Are there times when it is justified to lie? Is silence the same as deceit?

Session 6 : Chapters 11 - 13 : Judith and Holofernes

Notes to Chapter 11

v.12 The consumption of the blood of the livestock was forbidden (Leviticus 17:10-12).

v.13 The first fruits was set aside for the Levites in Numbers 18.

v.23 It's unlikely Nebuchadnezzar was sincere in this, cf Ruth 1:16 where Ruth commits to having the same God as Naomi.

Notes to Chapter 12

- v.2 Judith is in a similar situation to Daniel and his colleagues in Daniel 1.
- v.5 The Morning watch is also the time at which God destroyed the Egyptians (Exodus 14:24).
- v.7 The bathing is for ritual purity: not only is she among Gentiles, she's also among soldiers who were usually thought to be unclean because of their dealing with dead bodies.
- v.10 Remember Uzziah had encouraged the residents of Bethulia to hang on until the fifth day.
- v.16 Meals were usually eaten lying down, as almost certainly with the Last Supper.

Notes to Chapter 13

v.8 It was very difficult to decapitate someone with a sword so it should not surprise us it took more than one chop. Such was also the case with Mary, Queen of Scots, executed on the orders of Elizabeth I.

In Judges 4 Deborah is a prophetess who foretells the destruction of the armies of Sisera. His armies are destroyed and he flees, seeking refuge from the neighbouring Kenites. Jael offers him water and a place to sleep but while he sleeps she drives a tent peg through his head! In Judges 5, Deborah sings a song, praising God and highlighting the role Jael played.

vv.18-19 is sometimes used in the Church's liturgy on Feasts of our Lady.

v.20 is a foreshadowing of the eternal honour to be given to Mary: "all generations will call me blessed," (St Luke 1:48).

Desecration

We make things holy for use in Church, such as chalices and altars, the vestments the priest wears and, indeed, the Church itself. They can similarly be desecrated if used inappropriately but the blessing endures for ever

otherwise. Sacrilege is when a priest, monk or nun is physically assaulted or when a church is defiled through immoral use, such as murder or serious theft.

In 11:13, Judith tells Holofernes that one of the reasons she had left the Jews (remember she's lying) is because they have desecrated the Temple, consuming what was set aside for God. This had happened when Nebuchadnezzar II had stormed the Temple in the sixth century BC and when Antiochus IV had done the same in the second century BC. Both events are related to the book of Judith.

Note that the act of consecrating uses physical signs so as to communicate God's grace (anointing with oil, holy water, prayer). Similarly desecrating is not about bad feelings or nasty spirits, but something physically happening in a space or to something.

Is killing ever justified?

"You shall not kill" is the sixth commandment (Exodus 20) and the foundation of the church's teaching on important moral issues like abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment and murder. Jesus quotes the commandment (St Matthew 5:21) but says we mustn't even be angry with another.

As discussed previously in this series, there are times, however, when the church says war is justified and therefore the killing of some is tolerated. In the Scriptures, we see many deaths that are seen as pleasing in the eyes of God, for example that of Goliath by David in I Samuel 17. Self defence may have an unintended consequence of the death of another but respect for life includes love of our own life.

Suicide is wrong because we are stewards not owners of the life we have. Those who kill themselves will often be so gravely disturbed that the responsibility for what they have done is diminished. The Church prays for those who have killed themselves and they can be buried in church cemeteries.

Euthanasia and forms of assisted dying where the intention is to kill are wrong. This is different to discontinuing medical procedures that are "burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary or disproportionate to the expected outcome" (Catechism of the Catholic Church §2278), which is permitted.

Consider Have you every been in a position to discuss the ending of someone's life when they are sick?

1 Clement 55:3-6

The First Letter of Clement was one of the letters from the early church, written around the same time as some of the later passages of the New Testament. Here, it refers to Judith and Esther:

Many women being strengthened through the grace of God have performed many manly deeds. The blessed Judith, when the city was beleaguered, asked of the elders that she might be suffered to go forth into the camp of the aliens. So she exposed herself to peril and went forth for love of her country and of her people which were beleaguered; and the Lord delivered Holophernes into the hand of a woman.

To no less peril did Esther also, who was perfect in faith, expose herself, that she might deliver the twelve tribes of Israel, when they were on the point to perish. For through her fasting and her humiliation she entreated the all seeing Master, the God of the ages; and He, seeing the humility of her soul, delivered the people for whose sake she encountered the peril.

Session 7 : Chapters 14-16 : Celebrations

Notes to Chapter 14

v.10 Achior is an Ammonite, explicitly banned from being part of the assembly of God's people for ten generations (Deuteronomy 23:3). This is set long after then.

Notes to Chapter 15

v.6 The acquisition of riches is explicitly forbidden in the conduct of a just war.

v.9 This verse of praise is applied to Our Lady in some of the texts for the Assumption.

v.11 The thirty days of plundering mirrors perhaps the 34 days of the Assyrian siege if one includes the four Judith spent in the enemy camp.

v.13 Olive wreaths used in this way is typically Greek thing to do which indicates a later editing/composition of the book in the last three hundred years before the birth of Christ.

Notes to Chapter 16

v.6 Giants were known in the Old Testament, such as the Nephilim in Genesis 6:4.

v.14 See also Psalm 104:30 ~ “When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.”

v.17 “fire and worms” is an image our Lord uses in St Mark 9:47-48: “And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.”

v.18 purification was needed because they’d have come in to contact with dead bodies, as required in Numbers 19.

v.19 Votive offerings can still be left and are visible at shrines such as Lourdes.

Consider How and what do you celebrate? How does prayer and worship feature?

Old age

In Proverbs 16:31, “Grey hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life.” Several Old Testament figures are seen as being blessed because of their old age. It’s not the case in the New Testament though, where we’re not told the age of death of anyone. Generally in the Old Testament people are living less long as sin gets more and more of a grip on humanity. Methuselah is the oldest at 969 years old, son of Enoch and grandfather of Noah. The eternal life Christ calls us to doesn’t mean we’ll all live to 200 or even 300 but for ever.

Consider Does it matter what age we are when we die?

The Nature of hell

John Greenleaf Whittier's hymn "Immortal love," has the lovely line: "to turn aside from thee is hell, to walk with thee is Heaven." Modern Christianity struggles a bit with the concept of hell. We have to believe it exists, though the Church has never named anyone who has necessarily resided there for eternity. Hell is mentioned in the Apostles' Creed and our Lord teaches about it (St Matthew 10:28, 25:46, 13:50).

Writers have sometimes described elaborately what hell looks like. James Joyce puts in the words of a preacher in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, "Imagine some foul and putrid corpse that has lain rotting and decomposing in the grave, a jelly-like mass of liquid corruption. Imagine such a corpse a prey to flames, devoured by the fire of burning brimstone . . . And then imagine this sickening stench, multiplied a millionfold and a millionfold again . . ." Dante in *Inferno*, has circles of hell. Those blown about by passions are in a circle where it is constantly windy. Those who are greedy for money spend eternity squabbling over riches.

In the Bible, Hell is described as a furnace (eg. Revelation 21:8, Matthew 5:22) and elsewhere as a punishment (St Matthew 25:46).

Gehenna is literally the valley of Hinnom to the south west of Jerusalem. Here children were sacrificed by pagans to false gods (Jeremiah 7:31). A fire was permanently lit there as a crematorium. Jesus refers to Gehenna in St Mark 9:43 and St Luke 12:5 as synonymous with hell.

Consider Do you know any other descriptions of hell?

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