

From this week's Epistle, from the First Letter of St. Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians:

... I declare unto you the Gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand: by which also ye are saved... 1 Corinthians 15:

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For my generation they were called Coles Notes. Maybe some of you remember them. As you may recall, they were short summaries of major works of literature; designed to be study guides for students; to help students engage the text more thoughtfully. But for all of the good intentions that may have prompted Jack and Carl Cole to start the series way back in 1948,¹ as we can imagine they soon became a way for students to skip the hard work of actually reading the text. A kind of cheat. Why spend all the time needed to read nearly 1000 pages of *War and Peace*, for example, when you could read a volume just one-tenth the size of the real thing to get a reasonable picture of the characters and the themes and the plot? At least a good enough sense of the story to write a passable essay. For students whose only goal was to pass. The series eventually got sold to an American publisher, where it became Cliffsnotes.² And, of course, many years later some other people came out with an online version called Sparknotes. And so, it continues.

But whether you call it compressed knowledge, as the academics do, or cheating, it's hardly a modern idea. Long before Coles Notes and Cliffs Notes and SparkNotes, long before Readers' Digest or Executive Summaries or Wikipedia or Twitter,³ people were using some kind of condensed knowledge, some kind of summary, as a form of information management. Examples can be found from at least 1500 years ago in medieval Europe and in China. It is perhaps as old as literature itself: "part and parcel of literate cultures".⁴ Perhaps the only things that have changed are the methods that we use to do so. After all, as we all know, we only have so much time. And there is so much to read.

Perhaps for many of us, that same problem arises when we think about Holy Scripture. There's just so much to read. And only so much time to read it. And sometimes the messages in all the many pages of Holy Scripture can be confusing. Sometimes maybe contradictory. So, with your indulgence, I want to offer you as brief a summary of the whole scriptural story as I possibly can. Which, in truth, is neither difficult to do or difficult to remember. For all the words and images contained in more than a thousand pages in Holy Scripture, I think that it's safe to say that the whole scriptural story comes down to just four simple phrases; four ideas that are repeated over and over again: from the very first pages of the Book of Genesis to the very last pages of the Book of Revelation. Over and over again; page after page; book after book, God says to all of us:

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coles_Notes

² <https://web.archive.org/web/20080306231205/http://www.cliffsnotes.com/WileyCDA/Section/A-Brief-History.id-305430.html>

³ TL:DR – "Too long; Didn't Read"

⁴ <https://news.elearninginside.com/from-coles-notes-to-compressed-knowledge-a-condensed-history-of-the-summary/>

I love you. I am with you. Don't be afraid. You can come home.

That's it. Four simple phrases that summarise what Holy Scripture tells us over and over and over again. Four simple phrases that God has spoken to us in Jesus Christ.

I love you. I am with you. Don't be afraid. You can come home.

And, if we have those four phrases in mind, every time we read Holy Scripture; and every time as hear Holy Scripture, then everything begins to make sense. Not just everything in scripture but everything in life. Everything becomes clearer if we can keep these four simple words in mind:

I love you. I am with you. Don't be afraid. You can come home.

That's why Jesus is able to say at the end of the parable in this week's Gospel that the Publican, the Tax Collector, this great sinner who knows himself and knows his sin well enough that he dare not even lift up his eyes when he prays; [that's why Jesus is able to say of this publican] that he goes home justified, that is, that he goes home in a better relationship with God, rather than the Pharisee, the good guy in this story, the faithful, righteous, holy one, the one who gives tithes of all that he's supposed to tithe and even tithes that he doesn't need to tithe.

Because all the time God has been saying:

I love you. I am with you. Don't be afraid. You can come home.

Because the Gospel is the story of how Christ overcomes what we cannot overcome. For this Pharisee, for sure; and for us. Of how he does what we cannot do. Of how Christ forgives what we cannot have forgiven. Of how Christ has opened for us the road back home. Not because we were good. Not because we did all the right things. But solely because he loves us. With a love which is greater than our sin. And if we know that; if we know what Christ has done for us, by his death and resurrection; by the Cross of Good Friday and the empty tomb of Easter morning, then it becomes immeasurably harder for us to hold each other to account for the kinds of things that God refuses to hold against us. We love because God in Jesus Christ has loved us. We forgive because we've been forgiven. Whether we're more like this Pharisee or we're more like this Publican. Because God, in Jesus Christ, has welcomed us home.

And the problem for the Pharisee isn't that he's a bad guy. Quite the opposite. The problem is that he trusts himself more than he trusts the Grace of God. Because he trusts in his own power rather than the power and love of God. Because, in a way, he has set up his own integrity and virtue as a kind of idol.

"By the Grace of God, I am what I am", St. Paul confesses in this week's Epistle.

And *"God, be merciful to me a sinner"*, the Publican says in this week's Gospel on behalf of us all.

I love you. I am with you. Don't be afraid. You can come home.