

The First Day of the Scripture Course

The First Day Of The Rest Of Your Life

Today is the beginning of a lifelong process, around which, should you come to ordination, most of your work and life as a Deacon will revolve. The Scriptures are the material of your most important task – proclamation. They are the staple of your diet of prayer – the Divine Office. If you fail in the work you begin today, you will fail either as a Deacon – in which case I will have failed as the Director of Diaconal Formation – or as a Candidate for the Diaconate (in which case I will have succeeded). The Scriptures are the principal field of your study, and when you have thoroughly understood them, you will be fully-equipped for all your tasks. But what is said of the City of Rome – *non basta una vita* – is truer of the Scriptures: *one lifetime is not enough*. So you must take the threshold, which you cross today, as the beginning of a new commitment to the Bible, which will involve you for the rest of your life as your marriage involves you; it is a covenant, demanding daily and continual obedience and openness.

Many people, and I hope you are among them, have a loving and profound openness to the word of God. But this would not relativise what I've said. The listening of any layperson to the Bible is personal and committed, but the listening of an ordained Minister of the Word is something more. He is always listening with an edge, knowing that what he hears he must be able to proclaim with understanding, and most importantly, with a whole heart. This wholeness of heart demands that the word be assimilated into the life and being of the proclaimer. So this study of ours can never be an academic exercise, even as we try to make it rigorous, truthful, cleansed of prejudice or bias. It is about assimilating the word of God with mind, heart, and will, the placing of God's word at the heart of our endeavour, in such a way that it becomes a fountain of understanding for others: it is as ministers of the word that we study the word. So do not measure your commitment according to the interest you happen to feel in one time or place, but by the over-arching demands of your being addressed by God in his Word, and the duty to carry what is said to you into the life of the Church where you will be its minister.

Every educator has to be critical of the minds of the pupils. It's our duty to look out for the enemies which will be lurking in your personal and particular mental corners. This is not an easy process, because you will find it worrying and threatening to your security to study the Scriptures as a 21st-century person. But it is vital to do this, because the Bishop has to arrange for the Word to be preached to 21st-century people, and if you speak to them out of a mediaeval or Victorian mindset, they will not be captured by what you are saying. That you were once taught in those terms, even consistently spoken to like that, just makes it harder for you; it still has to come about that you learn to make the Word flesh in yourself and in your words before you can help others to hear. This is a sacrificial and demanding process.

The element of falsity in our reading of the Scriptures is very real. It's a form of mental schizophrenia. It results from the abandonment of the struggle to make sense of the written words, and the acceptance of a kind of privileged holy area where they make an internal sense all their own. What this does is to short-circuit our real lives, which remain unaddressed by the word, and to render our religion false in that it does not inspire our real life. If this is perceived as hypocrisy by non-believers, who don't read the Bible at all, we shouldn't be surprised. Areas of reality unaddressed by God remain dark, and become the lurking-places of other spirits;

what you are seeing in the present spate of paedophile scandals, for instance, is the evidence of what can happen to those who keep their religion and their real life in hermetically separated compartments. The religion may look impressive, adorned with skills and vestments and qualifications and ecclesiastical dignities and papal medals and trips to foreign pilgrimage sites. The Divine Office and Mass every day and holy nuns in convents inviting you to tea can all co-exist with the voracious and obsessive vein of wild nature that has been left out of the meeting with God. In such a person the apparatus of religion appears as a sick panoply of lies, and what happens next calls the life of the whole Church into question.

The aim of the Scripture Course is to do everything possible to annihilate the distance between our real minds and the real mind of the Scripture. Everything that we can learn about the historical moment in which a piece of scripture was written, about the author and his concerns, about the people he was trying to address and their concerns, and about the words he chose and their original meaning, will be grist to the mill. Further, the Scriptures were not a copyright reality when their original authors finished them; they have a subsequent history of editing and of translation, which we need to understand; the effect is of amplification, as a subsequent generation hears the word in a new context, and subtly alters the original setting of the words; this process of editing has its own literary criticism, which exposes the contribution added to the original work by those who edit it. This too is part of the history of the making of Scripture, the divine event of self-communication. Incidentally, the process of editing is not only carried out by qualified scholars according to rigorous terms of reference, but by each person as he or she hears the word. Individuals are sometimes impeded from hearing God's Word by their own prejudiced and cambered experience. Those who have suffered abusive dominion, for instance, can take little joy from phrases like *Kingdom of Heaven* or *Almighty Lord*; their improper treatment may have blinded them from the Gospel in multifarious ways, few if any may be known to them. Again, there are very many major and indispensable themes in the Gospel which are not to the taste of our times. Our task is, by careful study, to identify *our* handicaps and eliminate them, so that without distortion and without imbalance we may present the real Gospel in ways which will address all our hearers.

What makes Scripture, Scripture?

The books of Scripture have been discerned by the Church, and enshrined as the Word of God. There are heaps of other works written in similar circles and at the same time, which are not so discerned or so enshrined. What's the difference?

First of all, it's important to note that the difference is *not* in the mind of the author. Some of the literature in the Old Testament, for instance, is of so exalted a sort that it seems certain that the author was intending to embody the heart of the Hebrew faith, the tradition of the national soul. Other parts of the Scripture do not have such a tonality, and indeed may appear to be written in an entirely different spirit. Narratives of Exodus, describing the giving of the Law or the institution of the major feasts like Passover, or the great voice of Deuteronomy reiterating the traditions of the past, may seem destined by their authors for the gold-edged paper and the leather binding. But look at the simpler passages of Paul's letters, asking for cloaks or scrolls to be posted to him, or warning against the depredations of Alexander the Coppersmith, and the august tenor of the Scriptures seems suddenly reduced to

very local spaces indeed. Equally, there are passages of the Wisdom literature that embody the highest poetry of the Bible. They are worthy to stand beside the highest of any literature on earth. There are also passages which express the most earthy human wisdom, often unrelieved by any trace of the divine faith. Paul would certainly have been moved to polish his work if he had thought that it might one day be bound in with the Psalms or the Torah; he might also have thought of a different form than the higgledy-piggledy answering of questions sent to him in a letter or series of letters we have long ago lost sight of. That is, for instance, how the First Letter to the Corinthians received its form. The Letter to the Romans is entirely different, showing signs of conscious form and design. The first is a working document, embroiled in the fizzing waters of practicality; the second is an effort to embody the heart of the Christian message as the apostle preached it.

Secondly, as Catholics, we must not neglect the rôle of the Church in the establishment of the canon of Scripture. Fundamentally, a piece of writing is Holy Scripture because the Church says it is. This means there is a sense in which the Church sits above the Scripture: so it has always reserved the ultimate right to say not only which writings are Biblical and which are not, but also the ultimate right to declare what Scripture means. On the other hand, there is a sense in which the Church is utterly obedient to the Scripture, because it is God's word. (On a pastoral note, you will often find that there is a complete black hole surrounding this point in the minds of most "evangelical" Protestants: they seem to believe that the Word of God was simply always available and always recognised, on sale at bookshops everywhere in five grades of binding, with or without Apocrypha, and published by Eyre and Spottiswoode. Some assume that the last act of God towards the Scripture was to provide personal supernal guidance to the translators of the King James Version, so that the only true copy of the Scriptures should be that reserved for the Established Church of England).

Thirdly, the work of the Church in interpreting Scripture relies on the vital help of Scripture scholars, who bring to the first stage of the proceedings the simple power to read the Bible. By yourself you would not have this power, unless you are an expert in Hebrew and Greek and ancient history, and a brilliant critic of qualities of text and a competent Church Historian. If you lacked these qualities, all you would have would be some vellum volumes locked away in scholarly libraries. The Bible you buy in the High Street has had enormous work done to it before you open it; and yet the quality of this work must also come under our scrutiny; there is nothing infallible about it, and the work of understanding never ends. For centuries wrong judgments about this or that word in the Scripture have clouded the mind of the Church and of individual Christians; what we thought the Word was saying, it wasn't; and what the Word really said, we did not hear.

You can see that we have our work cut out for us. If there is anyone here who is not beginning to feel dizzy, please let me know now. I think dizziness is entirely in order.

So what hope is there for us chickens to achieve a reasonable competence in the study of Scripture, such as will fund a respectable ministry of proclamation and preaching? Brethren, do not despair. But do not relax either. You will need every ounce of energy to confront this task, and (as before) you must not hope to treat it as a hobby, or regulate your work-rate by your enthusiasm. This is the most central and serious part of your training, the one you cannot afford to skip on, and if you lay good foundations in this Course, you will find that the momentum of liturgy and pastoral necessity will continue to lead you forwards after the Course is ended; I have never stopped learning how to understand the Gospel, and neither must you. Having said that, I entered the seminary 35 years ago, since when my own study of

Scripture has been unremitting. Yet I would only claim to have a reasonable grasp of the depths of my own ignorance, and the vast dimensions of the subject that lies before us.

Equally, the work you do in this part of the Course, unlike, for example, the Canon Law section, will continue to enrich your personal Christian life whether or not you go on to be ordained. So let me encourage you to take it very seriously.

God Does Not Think

We are becoming ever more aware of the limitations of Scripture. These limitations do not emanate from God, but from us. We say that Scripture is the Word of God in human words. Let us see what that idea involves.

Human words appear at first to be sharply-defined realities; we value them in accordance with the exactitude with which they convey reality. That means that those anxious to communicate the personal effect of the Bishop of Nottingham, for instance, will be better pleased with words like “incisive”, “wise”, “authoritative”, “dignified”, “gracious”, and so forth, than with such woolly generalisations as “nice”, “good”, or “all right”. This means that the power of human words increases with their precision. Or as we sometimes call it, their definition.

But definition of its nature includes the concept of finitude, or finiteness: to define something is to draw its boundary with exactitude. Precision includes the concept of cutting down: you produce precision with a blade. Thus all human words are instruments of division, or categorisation.

Compare this with the things we say about the Word (singular) of God. God only has one word, who is Christ. In him everything was made, outside him nothing came into being. You and I are included in him, you might say we find our definition in him, draw our being from him, come to be who we are through his instrumentality. Yet he is not multifarious, but one: the only begotten Son of the Father. The unity we hope to build between human natures is thus only to be sought in him, who alone contains and unites all natures.

There will therefore never be a *definition* which will stand beside this Word, as it (or he) contains and transcends all varieties and possibilities of being. This is the Word which God speaks in creation, the one Word, the only Word of God.

From there we conclude that God does not speak in sentences, or even in words as we know them. He does not have thoughts or thought-processes as we have them. He only has one idea, and this idea includes, comprehends, orders and surpasses all that is, was, will be or ever might be. We can only picture a mind of encyclopaedic extent, like a vast organism of government full of strings of lists of names numbers and facts: and this is diametrically opposite to the truth, which is that God has only one Word, a single idea.

When we have meditated on this for a little while, the Church seems to be insufferably garrulous, the legacy of the Christian centuries suffocating itself with vocabulary, even the very Scriptures themselves verbose beyond belief. Realising that every word of them works only by analogy, metaphor, or image of the unimaginable and inexpressible transcendence of God, we may well feel with Augustine that anything we find to say about God will be more wrong than right, and that the great rackety engine of religious expression is poorly-fitted to do justice to

its purpose. I say all this, not to discourage you from entering into the study of Scripture – the most vital necessity – but to console you for your ignorance, and to help you to feel that the acquisition of Scriptural wisdom may often be more like the penny dropping than like the writing of a great volume full of facts. So often religious truth is found more clearly in a denial of something that is too small for God, in what appears at first sight to be an infuriating negative, or in a refusal to speak where our words confine him to human scale and knowledge. There is a seeming satisfaction in human knowledge, but it is dangerous for religion, where we have the draughty responsibility of proclaiming mysteries beyond the power of human words. We should constantly keep before us the words of Jesus to Peter: not only

Blessed are you Simon, son of Jonah, for it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven;

but also

Get behind me, Satan; for the way you think is not God's, but man's.

You could say that the entire religious history of humanity is a sully and polluting of the pure Word of Creation and Redemption. If so, the only excuse for it is that it has taken place in concession to our weakness through the express working of the Holy Spirit, that condescension expressed in mediaeval theology of the Incarnation: *non horruisti virginis uterum*; we could say, you did not turn away in horror from our human language.