

The Old Testament's Presence in the New

Considering the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments is for us a polyvalent process. You, as aspirants on the Diaconate Course, carry with you the heritage of your Catholic past - as variable as your various early educations. And now that you are students in a course for Major Orders, how do you learn to make allowances for your own past, to prepare for this project? How do you sharpen awareness last installed by a nun in a primary-school, or a teacher in a comp., to alert your brain to this new register of sensitivity? This is where the polyvalence opens up.

- You could go at it as a theologian, looking for the inherited theological themes of the Old Testament in the New. By what steps in human thinking does the Jew advance into the Christian understanding of God? For instance, what becomes of the mighty theme of Monotheism in the New Testament's trajectory towards a Trinitarian understanding of God?
- You could examine it like an historian of religion, seeking to chart the religious territory - liturgical, sociological, geographical - travelled by the Jews and the first Gentiles who made their transition between Judaism and Christianity.
- You could study it as a cultural historian, charting one of the greatest cultural shifts ever to happen in human history, when the nationalistic epics and prophetic traditions of a small middle-eastern nation - perhaps the most sedulously insulated of all nations in spiritual terms, precisely because of its complete lack of topographical identity - came into a vital cultural relationship with the greatest supra-national empire the world had ever seen. From this encounter came the history of Europe, and the Imperial story of Crusade and empire-building, missionary activity and Western cultural dominion.
- You could study it as a Catholic simply interested in the roots of his own faith.
- Regrettably, you could do the whole thing as an emotional LSD trip, led by inaccurate history, faulty theology, narrow-minded ecclesiology, and conservative moral positions, surrounded by fey spirituality, mawkish poetry, and bad art.

From which, Sacred Heart and Our Lady of Knock, deliver us!

A Religious Synthesis

The ultimate aim for a trainee deacon is to find *a religious synthesis* - in other words, a total understanding involving his faith and his real life. It must be fed by revelation and fully alive in intellect, and it must serve to integrate his whole personal understanding: of his own culture, of where he stands in this century, of the mind of Jesus, and of the way in which the Church embodies the revealing Christ through all ages.

Typically Catholics are trained to ignore the Jewish past of our faith - sometimes even by specifically Catholic forms of anti-Semitism; but in this we are misled and disabled. The Old Testament is key to our making of the vital synthesis between Old Testament and New Testament literature. In this lecture we shall be using *the tools of literary analysis* to examine the way we've come to understand the Bible, and to unlock the mechanism through which Scripture informs faith; as we do this, our method is not simply to observe our own mental processes when we read Scripture - which may be flawed, ignorant, or misguided - but to search for the way Scripture has worked on the Church in every age: and, above all, to see how it works on Jesus of Nazareth, who is "our one teacher, the Christ.". This cardinal field of insight will remain closed to us insofar as we are ignorant of the Old Testament, because the Old Testament *is* Jesus' Bible. So we are looking at the literature contained in the Scriptures, Old and New, and seeing the working of revelation in its literary incarnation.

"We are those who have the mind of Christ"

When St Paul claims *We are those who have the mind of Christ*, he is making an extraordinary statement. He doesn't simply mean that we *agree* with Christ or even that we *believe* what Jesus said. He is talking about a supernatural indwelling of Christ in the Church (he says "We are those who have", not "I am he who has" the mind of Christ) - in other words, he is claiming the same indwelling of the Spirit for the Church that he has perceived in Jesus Christ. To understand this it will be useful for us to study the Bible Jesus read, and try to read it through his eyes. Our literary understanding of the OT and our growing powers of archaeology both come into play in this exercise.

Why do we need such an exercise? Because we, like Paul, need the indwelling of the Spirit for our ministry to the Church as deacons. I can't spend a lifetime preaching thoughts, ideas, and perceptions that happen to interest *me*, telling myself that *my* mind is the mind of Christ. I'll hardly be a Christian minister if that's all I do. It doesn't matter how eloquently I may express my own thoughts, or how much satisfaction I may engender in those who hear me. If I don't speak out of *the mind of Christ*, and enable my hearers to have the same mind in themselves, I shall accomplish little or nothing in my sacramental ministry. So this is a very important moment in our study. Get out of the straitjacket of 21st-century Catholicism, and breathe the clear air of whatever scholarship you can find. It's medicine, and we need it.

What do we really know about the mind of Jesus Christ?

See how easily we assume the rightness of our impulses. Perhaps, in answering the question above, we would begin by imagining Jesus as a child, beginning to learn his religion. What would his parents have said to him as he was growing up? We assume an instantaneous community with him in this matter, and we may feel we have the answer ready: we simply look back to our own childhood and translate the words and attitudes of our mothers and fathers into what *we* think are first-century Jewish terms. Is this in any way valid? If it is, we would expect the popular understanding of Jesus within and without the Church to be a good deal easier than it appears to be. Here is a simple questionnaire - partly frivolous, but partly simply factual:

- What rôle did Jesus' schooling play in the forming of his mind?
- What were the parameters of the Sabbath-day instruction he received?
- Was the virgin Mary the prototype Catholic Mother?
- Did first-century Jewish children habitually learn to read or not?
- The text of the Masoretic Old Testament is Hebrew. The Septuagint is Greek. Jesus spoke Aramaic. What language did Aramaic-speaking Rabbis use for children's religious teaching?
- Do we have - indeed, is there an Aramaic version of the Scriptures?
- What would the tenor of the teaching in Jesus' local synagogue be, in the spectrum of Jewish culture of the day: was it Pharisaic and deeply conservative, at one end of the scale, or something akin to zealotry, with a profoundly subversive edge, at the other?
- What was the effect on Jesus' upbringing of the Roman occupation?
- Was his childhood affected by the large Gentile population in Galilee?
- What might have formed his attitudes towards Judaeans, Samaritans, foreigners in general? Was he interested in them at all, or did he restrict himself, as he restricted his disciples, to concern for "the lost

sheep of the house of Israel”? If not, how did his interest express itself?

- How and where did Jesus himself read the Old Testament?
- How was he moved by the Law, and how by the Prophets?
- What was he encouraged to think of himself as he grew older?
- What is the meaning of his family’s coming *to take charge of him, convinced he was out of his mind*?
- Why do *his brothers... not believe in him* in Jn 7?
- Is he called *Rabbi* because of his behaviour: could you acquire this title gratuitously, through other people’s spontaneous respect?
- Was he better educated than his fellow Galileans? If so, how come?
- Was his economic standing weak or strong amidst his fellow-Galileans?

We could go on multiplying questions like these, and most of us could hazard guesses at their answers. But would we be correct? These are questions for historians and archaeologists to answer, if they can (and we should make every effort to discover whether they can). Our temptation is to supply answers from reputable sources like the apocryphal Gospels, the musings of thirteenth century imaginative mystics, the catechisms of the sixteenth century, or devotional paintings of the nineteenth century¹. Who knows? They might be reliable. But the method certainly isn’t.

I guess the first literary awareness we should acquire in our quest for the Old Testament in the New is the complex series of ways in which the ancient Scripture can be evoked in the New Testament. The simplest way is by direct citation - inserting some phrase like “As it is written in the book of the prophet Isaiah” and then quoting verbatim. A short survey of Paul will show you this in full rabbinic form, since Paul was a rabbinic thinker². His choice of citations may often strike us as strange, but it is always instructive; we can see how he takes up the word he wants to illuminate - let us say, *faith* in the Letter to the Galatians - and a kind of index comes up in his mind, drawn from all the instances of the word *faith* in the OT. He then chooses the one which best fits his argument. Because Abraham is *the man of faith* and *the Father of all who believe*, texts about Abraham become the citations of choice. We can see an instructive example of this method when Paul wishes to suggest that all who live are “under the same curse” - Jew or Greek alike; his

¹ The influence of, say, Sir John Everett Millais (*Christ in the House of his Parents*, Tate England) on the popular imagination is hardly calculable; his image of a seven-year-old Jesus, consumptive, bleeding and preoccupied, in the clutch of Mary whilst St Joseph gets on with carpentry in the background opens up immense fields of assumption about what Jesus’ childhood was like. Is any of it justified from Scriptural reading? Does its simple acceptance by Christians give it an honoured place in “Tradition”, as the Church understands it?

² We have already remarked that Matthew’s practice resembles that of Paul.

mental index has two entries under the word *curse* - one being usefully “Cursed be anyone hanged on a tree” (*Dt 21:23*). In fact we find a large number of quotations in Gal 3:6-14, all grouped together around the twin concepts of blessing and curse. This way of meditation, based on key-words hunted through multiple OT occurrences, comes easily to Paul; it demands a real familiarity, a comprehensive grasp, of the whole Scripture, and a creative facility for playing one quotation very precisely off against another.

What are Words?

This word-based system of reference serves to draw our attention to a meditation on vocabulary itself. A human word seldom comes into being by an act of invention: Western science has become used to inventing *vocabulary* for its invented *things*, which then arc back into the language - for instance, we are used to referring to people’s particular sensitivity as their *radar*, or to speak of a man’s penetrating insight as *X-ray*. But language that has arisen naturally is of a different order; it grows organically out of experience, and is the fruit of our longing to name our experiences so that we can think about them ourselves and share our thoughts about them with others. Words have a vibrant life of their own, being the vehicles by which my thoughts leave me and cross over to you, entering your mind and putting us into mental sympathy, thus establishing communication and (if we will) communion. The shared word is therefore essential to human community, and the human community has the power to shape and change the words it uses as they are laden with more and more experience. This makes words into *living things*, rather than instruments for fixing, defining, and taming experience. T S Eliot, discussing the struggle to express human experience, remarks that

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
will not stay still. Shrieking voices
Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering,
Always assail them. The Word in the desert
Is most attacked by voices of temptation,
The crying shadow in the funeral dance,
The loud lament of the disconsolate chimera.³

³ T S Eliot, *Burnt Norton V* in *The Four Quartets*, Faber & Faber. You could do yourself immense good by reading this large set of poems, whose system of reference so closely paradigms the construction of Biblical language.

This is a poet's complaint against language; his aim is to create a timeless and faultless monument of communicative exactitude, which will carry into the minds of others a perfect sharing in what fills the mind of the poet, and which will preserve for posterity a significant moment in transient human experience. He is impatient at the recalcitrance of his medium: the words are not exact values, the currency fluctuates in value, the market is chronically unstable!

But looked at positively, language's dependence on the variety of personal experience introduces all the excitement of the immediate, the live, the conscious. Words are not logical equivalents which we supply to each other without adding anything. There is no such thing, in language, as "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth". This becomes very important when we consider the status of the Scripture as "Word of God". In that phrase we express our confidence that the collected words of Scripture can convey into our minds the communication of the mind of the *living* God; in other words, *Scripture can put us into communion with God*. Because we are human and have human minds, this has to happen (at our end) by human words - in all their "imprecision", their "straining, cracking, breaking, slipping, sliding and perishing". Miraculously, these human words are adopted by God and convey realities that are more-than-human, divine things. But the human space into which these words are carried by the community that experiences them is never neutral or aseptic. We infect our experience with the Word of God, and the Word of God is infected by the space in which it is spoken; that is why every liturgy is unique, and is a new place where God is speaking - in a small way, the Word is made Flesh in our space and time.

That is also why we Catholics have a different understanding of the Word from fundamentalists, who see the Word of God as something unchanged by human history, firmly fixed in eternity, whatever time may come and go. We have a far greater respect for the process of time, by which words display an iridescence of meaning because of the different media through which they pass. Jesus was not born into a providential moment of universal verities and stable linguistic community. He was born into a tiny linguistic enclave, in a century torn by competing forces, and a world divided by apparently insuperable barriers. Jesus was not primed to know everything and express everything. From the beginning he has needed to be translated, proclaimed, interpreted - not primarily by teachers and theologians, but precisely by *those who with noble and generous heart take the word of God to themselves, and yield a harvest through their perseverance*; this is a good definition of what Mary did at the Incarnation. Her deed gave us a Jewish messiah and an Aramaic Gospel. We have to take it from there.

We therefore value also the saints who have read the Scriptures and interpreted them by their living response; what Catholic could read our Lord's language about poverty without thinking of St Francis of Assisi? Francis gave the call to holy poverty in the Gospel a local habitation and a context which have truly altered our perception of its meaning. Our valuation of human persons is directly related to this understanding. Take the example of Moses, a prophet of God. The Word of God didn't pass through Moses without touching the sides. Rather, God's speaking in him made him Moses, and his being Moses was integral to the way God spoke to his people in 1300 BC. To isolate the Word spoken by Moses from Moses would be a short cut to distortion and misunderstanding; that is why the Gospel is full of stories of misunderstanding and strife between people - who all have the utmost respect for Moses.

But these are not just wrinkles on the surface of religious history. Remember that the heart of our faith - the Cross - is itself a misunderstanding carried to a final solution. Jesus' arguments with Jewish authorities are not trivial incidents; they are of central importance to his mission and meaning. He goes obediently to the Cross, which is made out of our misunderstanding of God. He dies of our misunderstanding, and willingly to do so was his only way to speak the truth to us. When God speaks through a human person, the historical receiving and transmitting of the message is integral to the message itself, and the message and its transmission is integral to the personal destiny of the messenger.

When Matthew makes Jesus go up onto a hillside and gather the people in a great crowd to listen to him, the image evoked is that of Moses on Mount Sinai. To be aware of this is essential to the correct reading of what follows. If the people in Lincoln don't know this fact about the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, then I must tell them, because it is to tell them such things that they pay me. Once I've told them, I must go on to help them to sustain the message this gives about Jesus - which will, in turn, draw its meaning from their understanding what it meant for Moses to stand on Mount Sinai. This kind of communication is not spelt out in conceptual terms, as I'm spelling it out now. It comes, instead, through the magical power of words to communicate in several different registers at the same time. We need to sharpen our sensitivity to these different registers, so as not to miss the richness of the Scriptures.

You may recall the three levels in the making of the Gospel tradition. Briefly to recapitulate they are

- Stage One - the historic life of Jesus of Nazareth

- Stage Two - the oral transmission of Jesus' words and deeds, the first mission
- Stage Three - the creation and editing of Scriptural texts: the Gospels.

The Old Testament palpably acts on this process at all points:

- in Stage One it happens that Jesus consciously chooses to quote Scripture (eg Jesus said: *From the beginning God made them male and female...*), or chooses to act in such a way that people will recall the Scripture themselves (Jesus scattered the money-changers' coins, and said: *Get all this out of here and stop using my Father's house as a market.* Then his disciples remembered the words of Scripture: *Zeal for your house will devour me.*).
- In Stage Two it happens by the citation of Scripture as an element in the early proclamation of the Good News (Peter said: *David himself never went up to heaven, and yet he said: The Lord declared to my Lord: Take your seat at my right hand until I have your enemies your footstool. For this reason the whole house of Israel can be certain that the Lord and Christ whom God has made is this Jesus whom you crucified.*).
- In Stage Three it happens when the evangelist purposely draws a link between what he sees Jesus do, and what he reads in the OT.

We could even identify a new stage, which also forms part of the revelatory economy: when we read the Scripture in the community, especially at the Eucharist, it takes on the context of the community, not only changing the community, but in some sense being changed by it. We should see the central and primary instance of this occurrence in the coming of Jesus Christ; he takes up the Scriptures in their entirety, and says to us: *These texts are being fulfilled even now, in your presence, as you listen to me.* The meaning of the word *fulfilment* is worth a good deal of thought. I shall be asking you to write about this in your assignment.

Asked to fix the place where God reveals himself to the world, we have to say that this place is the person of Jesus of Nazareth. But we can't withdraw the status of the whole revelatory story of Israel and of the Church, or forget the Scriptural inheritance of the Old Testament, because these are integral to our understanding of Jesus, and integral also to his own understanding of himself. It isn't that there is anything outside Jesus Christ that is essential for salvation: perhaps we could best express it by saying that the impact of Jesus on the religion of the Old Testament is the exact point where God is revealed to us. That is why so much of the Gospel is taken up with the

arguments between Jesus and the Jewish authorities. A superficial reading of this tradition has led many to conclude that the Old Testament was a basically flawed environment, and that the Jewish religion was something Jesus came to abolish. This has to be a distortion of the worst kind. The Son of God honoured the Jewish religion by learning, within its words and disciplines, about his Father and about himself. He lived his whole life faithful to its precepts, liturgy, and prayer. We cannot honour it too much, or spend too much time learning to know it.