

The End of the Scripture Course

I think the end of a long course of study is a time for reflection and re-evaluation. It's been my experience that students can hardly remember at the end of three years what ignorance and prejudice they have happily lost in the process - a fact particularly true of those who set out in stout denial of all ignorance and prejudice - and it would not do to waste time raking over the cold coals of the past. However, it does seem worthwhile to re-visit in our minds the intentions with which our Scripture course started out, and to wonder how far we have realised these intentions in practical terms.

My first aim was **to destabilize the attitude of students towards the Scriptures** as quickly and as radically as might be managed. It remains true that the great majority of people in the Catholic church in England and Wales has a remarkably narrow idea of the Bible, either in terms of its real power, or in terms of its depth of meaning. People can develop extraordinary sophistication in other matters - indeed, a civilisation like ours demands enormous sophistication if we are to remain alive and reasonably healthy whilst we are in it - and yet retain in their understanding of their religion a mind like that of a little child of about ten.

There is great confusion about this remarkable fact, and many people assume that this is the very childlike quality whose praise Jesus sings in the Gospel, and therefore live peacefully with all sorts of inane notions, on the grounds that children can and do. In this they have generations of encouragement from the sort of hedge-priest who took refuge from his own inferior mentality by calling the asking of questions, intelligence, and the desire for understanding the work of the Devil. Now, it is comforting to such people if they can think that their graceless misinterpretation of the Scriptures might be excused on the grounds of holiness; but it has also provoked great scandal, and lost the Church much of its credit in the human exchanges of the University and Parliament, Press and Media, in the minds and hearts of the people for whom it must proclaim Christ, and even in its own members, when they see ridiculous, often cruel prejudices exalted into the place of divine wisdom and ordinance, all supported by the assiduous traducing of the Word of God.

Accordingly, I've always wanted to introduce into the minds of everyone I dare to teach a spirit of mistrust of established conclusions and repetitive understandings, in order to make room for a real dialogue with the living Word of God, ever old and ever new, always directed into the heart of the issues and questions we confront with exactitude and ultimate relevance. When I hear this living encounter being smothered with a combination of garbled citation and half-understood interpretation, I know that souls are being lost, and another leak is being sprung in the fabric of the Barque of Peter. I hope you have grown an extra antenna which alerts you to the certain wrongness when the interpretation of Scripture is negative or boring; it will help you to scan your own homilies with a critical eye.

You will have noticed the way in which we have made various forays into very different forms of scriptural writing: the ancient, half-pagan world of the narrative Torah, the polished worlds of royal chronicle and court wisdom, the anguished world of the prophets, the lyrical world of Hebrew poetry and psalmody; but we have always returned, again and again, to the twin plants of the Gospel tradition - the Synoptists and John. To scatter the subjects in this way must have seemed chaotic, but the overall shape has its own logic. We don't read the

Old Testament as if we were Hebrews, nor as people who have outgrown it and have no more use for it. We read it, very specifically, and as scientifically as we can, as if we were Jesus of Nazareth during his thirty-odd years of life. So there is no part of the Old Testament that has nothing to tell us about him. When we read a seemingly irrelevant Jewish commandment in Leviticus, we can be sure that Jesus read it before us, resolving as he did so - in every case - that *not one little stroke shall pass from this Law until its purpose be achieved*. Equally, we read the Psalms as his prayer-book, knowing that they flowed in his bloodstream, even as he shed his blood on the Cross, and that therefore even the most horrific of these prayers is a prayer of Jesus, formative of his religious mind and heart.

I hope the position adopted by the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* - that the Word of God is primarily the meaning that was in the mind of the original Scriptural writer - has been well-understood and accepted by all of you, so that the continual growth in awareness of the concerns and motives of Old Testament characters continues to hold your attention, even when there seems only a tenuous connection between what you read in Hebrew Scripture and the dogma of the Catholic Church. The whole of Scripture, and above all the word of the Prophets, continues to bring the Church to judgment, and we who are to preach within the Church have the responsibility to receive the word gracefully: *O that today you would listen to his voice....harden not your hearts!* If it is sometimes easy to distance ourselves from the burning concerns of the Scripture, that may be our time of deepest danger, and simultaneously our greatest opportunity for change and rebirth. God brought us into being by the speaking of his eternal Word. Our custody of the eternal Word is therefore the guardianship and ministry of Creation itself. Great things are put under our hand in this ministry. We must never fail to deliver them for what they are.

There is always a sense of disappointment when something comes to an end. We warned you at the beginning of this course how appallingly short it must fall of the educational *volume* it ought to have. You can't underestimate the value of repeating processes, such as the great critical methods of study, in many different contexts. If only we had had time to carry out form-critical study of many more passages, if only we had the freedom to examine the editing-process of Scripture in greater detail and in more examples, we might have established a far surer facility in your minds, a swifter reaction to the first reading of a piece of the Scripture. The acquiring of a good grasp of the various influences of successive periods of history on the Bible would have made you much more alert to the vocabulary and the mental worlds through which the authors were passing as they did their sacred work.

A second intention, therefore, was the simple-seeming one of helping you to **see the extent of learning that is possible for you**. We have frequently concentrated our whole attention on quite small tracts of the Gospel, or of the Torah, and tried to unpack the depth which the structure of the Bible makes possible, by its extraordinary complexity of reference and interdependence. I hope that this experience has opened to you the likelihood that any casual first reading of a piece of Scripture falls short of apprehending its true depths. Always follow up loose threads and find genuine meanings for the words you meet. The knowledge you acquire in this way will soon accumulate.

The Bible has appeared to us again and again as the library of a whole and extraordinarily *integrated* national tradition. Its hugeness, balanced against its unanimity, creates of it a huge web of cross-reference, where every generation serves to add greater extent to a *common* tradition of lived experience united by a single fidelity. So the massive integrity of the Scripture unites and deepens the experience of all its heirs, giving to those who listen to it today kinship with those who followed Moses through the desert, or listened to Ezekiel, who fought with David, or who suffered the Exile.

Jewish people have seldom been apparatchiks, artificially united or brainwashed into uniformity. The endurance of this cultural fidelity to the Bible is not a matter of any barren repetitive state of inherited warping, like that which typifies the sick sectarianisms of (say) Ulster. Rather it has expressed itself in the enormous variety of many centuries of tradition; and it must be said that a high proportion of this spiritual heritage is expressed in literature of high quality. This variegated texture of the Scripture has demanded the third field of our study, the acquisition of some study-skills for the ongoing work of interpretation and application which is bound up in the life and calling of a deacon or of anyone in Holy Orders. Again, the confined limits of our Course has made it hard for us to more than a very little; and it's doubtful whether even quadrupling the time at our disposal we could have communicated anything really adequate to all students. This is an area where the enthusiasm of the student will more or less exactly determine the degree of attainment, which depends on consistent and regular reading at a fairly high level. *This has got to continue.* It should not be difficult to feel the need for it if your ministry takes off; you will need it like the need for food or for medicine.

We've tried to give you **the experience of using at least basic books**, and the ability to look further when a question presents itself. The rest must come through determination and the resolve not to duck responsibility when real questions are put to us by the faithful. It is better to say *I don't know, but I will do what I can to find out* - and mean it - than to present a slick answer out of a textbook and walk away. People are perfectly used to understanding very little of what is read to them in Church; even what is said to them is frequently beyond their understanding. Their silence in receiving the Word is sometimes that of heartfelt obedience, but more often it is that of total ignorance. Even if no-one ever asks you a searching question about Scripture, therefore, it is up to you to create a listening Church by forcefully removing the blinkers of familiarity and the misunderstanding of poor translation and thin explanation. This won't happen unless you come to the lectern with the enthusiasm and excitement of people who have a new message to communicate. If no-one asks you a question, perhaps you should ask *them* questions until they get the point that the Scripture puts us all on the spot: *it is the Lord who speaks.*

You are therefore condemned to study for the rest of your life. We have tried to show you how to go about it.

If all the three aims above have only been partly successful, the fourth aim is the least measurable of all. There is a dimension at which we have aimed in this Course, which has perhaps only been suggested and glimpsed quite rarely.

I've tried to put across the idea that all our expertise and the scholarly mechanisms of others, whose harvest we gratefully take in, cannot blind us to the great paradox at the heart of our faith: that the God we search for in reading and discussion and study is quite beyond the bounds of human expression at its highest, beyond the dimensions of human grasping. by whatever faculty. Where our discourse falls silent, therefore, is where we begin **to sense the transcendent mystery of God** to which we are called to witness. This precious moment, which I've tried to refer to as reaching a threshold between the human and the divine, is not to be induced, or described, or mapped. We often approach it unwillingly, and it sometimes appears to us as a failure in our plans, a formal defeat for our understanding, even (this is the conclusion of philosophers of the English school) the discovery of a dead end. You might say that in intellectual terms it parallels the way in which the disciples could not accompany Jesus to the Cross, or understand him when he told them about it before it happened. Our attempts to understand God often use the way in which we overcome our ignorance of the world, winning our way to knowledge, sometimes like pirates capturing a prize. In those terms theologians would be riding for a fall. True knowledge of God is not to be stolen; it is a gift from God, a favour.

Our realisation that we are speaking like Job of things too great for our mental processes and verbal equipment is not, however, the experience of pure failure. In fact, it is a moment of grace, when we are given the power to look beyond our limitations, and stop the chatter of our earthbound tongues, and worship the unknown God. This is, in fact, the holy place to which we are trying to attain, the place of humility to which our pilgrimage is directed. There is no short cut to this place through chicanery, folly, deception or nonsense. It is the reason why we have a category of sanctity called “doctor of the Church”: the sanctity that is attained when a man or woman has taken every step laid open to them by their intellectual gifts, and at the last has been brought to kneel before the unspeakable mystery of God. Like the man born blind in Jn 9, we proceed through our disability towards the unseen Christ, but the end of our faithful searching is to submit in faith, and to worship. If we can help others to that end, we have done everything that is asked of us as preachers.

The Fascination Of What’s Difficult

This phrase of WB Yeats’ gives me a little purchase on the advice I’ve tried to pass on to you about preaching. I don’t feel as if I’ve made my point very well, and it is one which may well be cognate with something that came out of our psychometric tests, and also at the retreat.

At the risk of labouring the point, I would recall to you the advice about weakness which has been given to you: that **your weaknesses will only detract from your ministry if they become a place of shame and of denial**. It is a contradiction of the Gospel we preach if we let ourselves assume a rôle of falsehood and deception, either of other people or of ourselves. We must lead the way as people who accept our own weaknesses, and those of our people, without bitterness and recrimination, as the place where we most personally encounter the divine mercy. I remember quoting the words of St Paul (2Cor 11:30, 12:7-10):

If I have to boast, I will boast of all the ways in which I am weak

So that I should not get above myself, I was given a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to batter me and prevent me from getting above myself. About this I have three times pleaded with the Lord that it might leave me, but he has answered me: *My grace is enough for you; for power is at full stretch in weakness*. It is then about my weaknesses that I am happiest of all to boast, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me; and that is why I am glad of weaknesses, insults, constraints, persecutions, and distress for Christ’s sake. For it is when I am weak that I am strong.

These words have always been interpreted to refer to Paul’s physical weaknesses. But of course “distress” and “insults” are not primarily physical, and the weakness of our understanding, the known weakness of our ability to proclaim Christ are among our most telling difficulties.

Rather, therefore, than pretend that we are going to suddenly become eloquent and rounded advocates of the Gospel, we should use our very weaknesses in the way that Paul sees them used. If we can’t answer the question of the meaning of life convincingly and cogently, we may perhaps help our listeners to formulate their *perplexity* with greater exactitude. If we can find little to say that is comforting and healing in a particular time of sorrow, then to formulate a prayer that accurately expresses the *pain* will be a way of turning it into a shared experience, and thus give it the eloquence of the Cross. In other words, there is always a way through our inadequacies, if only we approach them in the spirit of realism and acceptance.

There is also an important prudential point to be made about yourselves as preachers of the Word. At the beginning you will find yourselves obsessed with technical matters, such as how to stop your knees knocking together in front of a large congregation, how to make

yourself heard and understood, how to cope with the false compliments and ominous silences of other people, and the rest. These preoccupations are temporary (although the “fear and trembling” with which Paul went among his churches is for life). You will soon grow out of the need for copious notes, knowing that you can make only a little point at a time; you will be able to put your heart into the task of communicating, and you will lose the need to tell the congregation the full picture as seen in the Catechism, the processes of the Christological Councils, and the declarations of the Synod of Pistoia.

At the beginning, you will perhaps feel that you’ve done very well to present a reasonably rounded talk with a beginning, a middle and an end. Indeed, if it sounds like something you might have heard last week in church, all the better.

But you won’t have been ordained as a clone of the present range of staff. You have to find a voice of your own, a point of view that is uniquely yours, and the capacity to awaken interest and rethinking in others. I’m not talking about novelty for its own sake. I’m talking about the apprehension of the Gospel as a live meeting with a living Christ.

St Paul often speaks of *reminding* people of the Gospel. I don’t think we should think of an endless repetition of old words. I think the English word *reminding* might be taken much more creatively: we are to give people a new mind, to take from them the bored and choked-up mind they’ve been living with, and to give them something new to think of. The Mass itself is *anamnesis* - the not-forgetting of Jesus. Make the Gospel into news, and you have re-entered the mind and heart of your listeners.

The humility of the homilist is the power to choose very little to say, and then to express himself as clearly and justly as he can, transmitting in his vocabulary and his tone of voice faith in the Gospel, hope in the promises of God, and love for the people who hear him. I honestly believe that anyone who fulfils these very modest aims has cracked it.