

Studying Scripture

When people begin to study for the Diaconate, it is our job to establish for them some guidelines, to help them structure their minds for the task ahead. It isn't an easy business, it will take some time, and for some it will be more difficult than for others. Let's try to be patient with one another! We have to keep a weather eye on everyone's state of confidence and make sure that every one of you has a way forward, and can make progress by a bit of application and hard work.

Part of the difficulty comes from the nature of the Church itself. Some people think the Catholic Church is monolithic, a great big corporation with a single mind, built of uniformly chamfered blocks. It used to be joined by people who wanted a rock-like simplicity to hang onto. The Church used to join in this deceptive presentation, speaking of the rock-like certainty of a Church founded on Papal Infallibility, with a liturgy which, if not actually composed in the Upper Room, was practically the same as what St Paul did on a Sunday Morning. This had great internal coherence, and most Catholics, like Evelyn Waugh, were at a loss to see how anyone could possibly fail to see it as the One True Church. Indeed, it was big on uniformity - the Mass, we all agreed, is the same in Worksop or Westminster, Clacton or Caracas, the clergy all sing from the same hymn-sheet, and the minds of the faithful are all quite properly homogenized to a central standard, used in seminaries to test the fitness of clergy, exercised in the confessional to regulate the moral decisions of the faithful, supplying litmus for the evaluation of theological orthodoxy, and applying equally at every level from peasant to Pope.

I've not heard anybody talk like this for a refreshingly long time; but the feel can still be there in any gathering of Catholic people - like ours today, for instance - that we are here in a field of power like the Comintern, which has a single set of attitudes which must be adopted by all. Within this régime, the various features of Church life, like Liturgy, Scripture, Authorities, Historical Views, Canon Law and the rest, are self-explanatory realities that everyone knows and accepts. If you have a difficulty, you just have to look up the answer somewhere and it will be resolved. Anyone versed in the sniffology of religion will recognise here the same form of fundamentalism that characterises Low Protestantism: there is the Plain Truth of the Gospel Message, which is simple and incontrovertible, and you either accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Saviour, or you don't, and go to hell.¹

My own area in this Course is the Scripture. If we apply the above musings to the field of Scripture, we find that people are accustomed to listening to chunks of it when they go to Mass: they find it familiar, usually, on Sundays, and strange (often) should they stray into Church on a weekday. Some of it grabs them, some of it turns them off. One question always niggles me: what range of attention can we find in our congregations? Are people really listening to these words with attention, as words which have power and significance, as youngsters gather to hear what they did in their exams, or people meet their doctors to hear the results of their tests? We call our central Scripture "the Good News"; but does anyone

¹ We have here a syndrome whose effects run very deep. Such is the awareness of the necessity to conform that candidates for orders habitually present themselves as more morally sound and spiritually whole than they are or could possibly be. The idea that you have been selected for the diaconate or the priesthood because of your sterling moral excellence, and that you will be disqualified and spat out if your real faults are detected, is, you may think, ridiculous.

Nevertheless, psychiatric testing regularly reveals that candidates for orders are industriously cloaking their weaknesses from investigation, denying perfectly ordinary human failings. This misunderstanding is a grave fault, since it is our weaknesses which make us acceptable to other weak people as ministers of the Gospel.

listen to it as people listen who are anxiously awaiting news? Look at the fandango surrounding the Diaconal proclamation of the Gospel at Mass: it is designed to have the same effect as the Headmaster summoning an extraordinary assembly, walking onto the dais, and saying: *I have an important announcement which seriously affects every one of us*. The sight of people on the receiving end yawning, or looking out of the window, or whispering to their next door neighbour with a big grin on their faces, shows what effect all of this has.

Then, further questions arise. *Why do we do this at all?* Why are a billion people across the face of the earth (one in seven of the human race) commanded to sit through the public reading of words at least nineteen centuries old, which have been laboriously handed down and subjected to heavy lifting-gear - by way of translation and interpretation - to bridge the gap between their past and our present? Could any one of us, without careful preparation, stand up and defend this extraordinary practice with any cogency? We just accept it unthinkingly. For comparison's sake: how many of us enjoy any contact with any other writing of similar age? How many of us have bothered lately to revisit the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius or the *Dialogues* of Plato or Caesar *On The Gallic War*?

My aim in this Course is to find the reason for our veneration of the Bible, and to try to make it possible for each of you to tackle the reading of its Scriptures with increasing knowledge and familiarity. I want you to be *competent* to progress in this knowledge, which I believe will lead to love, and will make you able to preach to the people who obediently come to listen in ways that will make it worth their while.²

Let us think of some basic facts about Scripture and about us as its ministers.

- Scripture is *literature*, even if literature of a very specialised kind. You need to specialise to read literature intelligently; one of the main aims of a rabbinic training was simply to teach the candidates to read; a difficult art in Hebrew, which has no written tenses for verbs, and which therefore relies more than most languages on the creative skill of the lector. I am told that Cantonese is similarly constructed, and that the verbs are simply thrown in unmodified, and interpreted according to need by the reader. You can see Jesus doing this at the beginning of his discourse on bread, in John's 6th chapter.
- Scripture is *ancient* literature, some of it approaching twenty-nine centuries of age in its written form. Most Englishmen are challenged by the task of reading Chaucer, a mere six centuries old. The technical tasks of translation are much misunderstood by most people, who believe that it is easy to produce an equivalent to an ancient document with the aid of a dictionary and a quire of paper. But words are living realities, and they do not have stable qualities; each individual word has a capacity to change, grow, diminish, recede, or as Eliot said,

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

² Incidentally, this is an awesome privilege, even at a human level. Can you name anyone in Lincoln who is not a Catholic priest, who has the chance to be listened to attentively by four hundred men women and children for fifteen minutes every Sunday, week in and week out? What are we doing with that time - theirs and ours? They should come away from it *struck* by something we've said, *thoughtful* about their own attitudes, and *opened up* to a possible revision of their living practice. If we've only succeeded in making them *bored*, we have failed to the point of culpability. God may have spoken to them in some technical sense, but the encounter they have experienced denies the fact. And we have made it one degree more likely that they won't listen next week either, as their worst fears have been fulfilled yet again.

So anyone who picks up an English version of the Scriptures and treats it uncritically as the unaltered Word of God is already making a huge act of faith in the translator.

- Scripture is *foreign* literature - from a different continent. Culturally it is from a far distant realm from ours, though it has moulded our own culture like no other literature; so our relationship with it is deep and complex. Every culture, for instance, should have foundation stories; this place is largely taken in Europe by the Biblical ones, so that we all talk familiarly of Adam and Eve as if they were distant relatives. But does such a usage bring us close to the thinking of *Israelites* - for whom those ancestors bore the generic names "the Man and the Woman" - or have we, so to speak, "cartooned" them into personalities, losing their significance in a hail of jokes, disbelief, and mockery? Can a culture that sat through the ridiculous punch-up called *Darwin versus the Church of England* still read Genesis with veneration? We can't read it with the same mind, that is for sure.

What can we ask of you in the Course that lies ahead? I've been privileged to study Scripture more or less intensively now since 1966 - forty years, since the first publication of the Jerusalem Bible. As part of this study I have over nine years read English at a British University and scholastic philosophy and general theology at the Gregorian in Rome. Then I've been using the Lectionary of the Catholic Church for thirty-three years, during which time, except when I've been on holiday, I have preached at least once, and regularly four times, a day. I've learned a bit of Latin and less Greek and so little Hebrew that I might as well know nothing. There is no way I can claim to have "read the Scripture" except in translation; and if someone claimed to have studied Shakespeare, and then admitted they had only read him in a Serbo-Croat translation, I should smile a superior smile and change the subject. I sometimes think we're less influenced by the actual Scriptures than by the use to which Scripture has been put by the Church over the centuries. We have to cope with a body of *interpretation* which has almost as great an impact as the original documents themselves, and which sometimes stands between us and the real apprehension of the Scriptures as their authors intended them to be read. This business of interpretation has been in the picture from the beginning: what Matthew thought the Parables of Jesus meant, for instance, appears in his Gospel on the lips of Jesus himself; and there are powerful arguments which suggest that Matthew was wrong in his interpretation of the parables. His interpretations, however, are as much part of the Canonical Gospels as the original parables are, and thus have an authority of their own, even if we can almost be certain that they do not proceed from Jesus.

When I think of the poor grasp that I have of the Scriptures after nearly a lifetime of labour, and when I look at what I shall be able to offer you over the next three years, it seems like a task against impossible odds. We shall share roughly thirty-four hours of teaching, and then it is down to what you can achieve by yourself at home, with the help of your supervisor. For this reason the actual lectures will often seem somewhat dense, as I believe telling you and showing you things may work better for some of you than simply telling you what to read.

But put aside any fond idea that when this Course is over you will be in some sense qualified in Scriptural study. You will have no feeling of a comprehensive grasp of all that is in the Bible. The major feature of your education will be learning how little you know. All we hope is that you will be able to pick up the Scripture for a particular need - such as preaching at a Mass, or preparing for celebrating a Sacrament - and be able to think methodically and intelligently about what the Scripture really says.³ We hope you'll know what books to consult, and that with growing accuracy you will sniff out the elements which distort and

³ I was once called to celebrate Mass for 129 first-year children in a comprehensive school. The declared theme of the Mass was "setting out on a journey". The Scripture chosen was Jesus parable in the sermon on the mount about the house built on sand versus the house founded on rock, preceded by Paul telling the Corinthians that they were God's house. When you think of the stories they could have chosen about setting out on a journey, you stand amazed at the incompetence and ignorance with which otherwise intelligent people can approach the Bible. There's work for us to do here.

confuse our congregations' understanding of what they hear read out. We can hope that you will acquire some big ideas which you can apply to the reading of the whole Bible, so that you will always have something stimulating to say, and always be able to notice something which you can communicate with enthusiasm - a new insight, a fresh take, the starting of a new train of thought. You can only provoke that atmosphere of *Good News* if you yourself have been arrested by some new realisation, and adopted a new attitude, because of your reading. This is the frontier between scholarship and spirituality. There is wonder in the Scripture, but it is lethal to hear it referred to at second hand, by someone who has been told that it's there, but has never personally felt it.

We should be careful to note that we are opening up a profoundly new area. Catholics have looked down on Protestant Christians generally for their poor understanding of the Eucharist. Catholics are used to standing in Anglican churches, looking around at the treasures of art and architecture which our own Churches so often lack. Then they say, *It's very nice; but there's nothing here, is there?* - by which they mean, there is no tabernacle with a little light beside it; and if this particular premises has so far forgotten itself as to install a tabernacle with a little light, we have a Catholic certainty that there's nowt of any significance inside it.

Now, Protestants would say exactly the same thing about Catholics: but instead of *Eucharist* they would say *Scripture*. Our attitude to Scripture has traditionally appeared precisely as painfully lacking and inadequate to Protestants as their attitude to Eucharist has to us. Scripture, for them, is the great Sacrament; and our near-indifference to the Bible over four hundred years disqualified us in their sight just as surely. I would like to think that we can redress that fault, and turn the tide of misunderstanding, and open up some of the old logjams that have stopped the Church's progress ever since the horrors of the 16th century.

“The Word of God”

In every part the Scripture is a piece of human literature, composed by a human being sitting at a desk. Everything you find in the Bible has passed through the hourglass of a thinking fellow human being's mind. Like all human literature it bears the marks of its time and place, the limitations and prejudices of its writer, and the talent or infelicity of his writing technique. There is in the Bible great literature, and there is drivel too (though not much). The gaining of sensitivity to all these factors is a delicate and long process, and it's good that we have a lot of help. But very soon we come up against a huge question: in what precise sense are these writings called “the Word of God”?

Let's immediately say that God could not have *written* the Bible in our sense. He has no archives and no theories, no traditions or literary forms - or shares in the Oxford University Press or Darton Longman and Todd. So in what sense is he, in the words of the Second Vatican Council, “*the true author*” of Scripture? I think we can go further than distancing God from pen-and-ink, and point out that God does not use words, as we do; that he does not think in sentences, as we do; in fact (and here we are on the verge of our failure to understand) the mind of God is actually filled with only one single and undivided Word, which contains all that is, or could be, in one act of understanding. God has, if you like, no mental processes. The mind of God is total, and simple. He apprehends all reality in one single act of knowing. We only know things one after another, lineally, trapped as we are in incompleteness and time. We speak in halting sentences, moving slowly forwards, and only knowing a little of what we seem to understand. So we shouldn't even think of God “dictating” the Scripture, as if he too needed a halting inner dialogue to move towards

knowledge and judgment. (We already know this really; I've never heard anyone say "I think God got it dead right when he said..." or "God says - and I agree with him - ")

Instead, we speak of a reality called "inspiration". The Hebrew word for breath, *ruah*, is rendered into Greek as *pneuma*, from which we get the word "pneumatic". This in turn is delivered into Latin as *spiritus*, from which comes the French *esprit*, meaning both "spirit" and "wit". At the root of this idea must be the ancient image in Genesis of the God Elohim forming man from the dust of the earth, and breathing into him the breath of life, so that man becomes a living being. That is the original "divine inspiration", and it bestows the gift of life itself. The human life so given is God's life too; and soon the notion develops that one day it will be returned to the God who gave it, when we finally "expire". You will remember that Jesus spoke of "giving the Spirit" to his disciples if he should go to the Father, and when he dies the Gospel of John gracefully says *He yielded up the Spirit*. The exact meaning of this pouring-out of the spirit of Christ is something we shall go into carefully later. It's enough to say that the outpouring of Jesus' spirit and the arrival of the Pentecostal Gift of the Father are intimately connected. Clearly the reality of inspiration is complex and many-layered, and there is nothing crude or facile about the way in which we believe Scripture to be inspired.

We must not, therefore, think of God's overriding of the human authors, as in some kind of automatic writing; nor must we think that God has hidden divine sugar-plums amid their work in the form of secret or cryptic messages whose true meaning only becomes clear years later on. Such ideas are disrespectful to humanity, and contradict the way in which we know God deals with us. If we swallow such thinking, we become superstitious, looking all the time for ulterior meanings and *gnosis*, or secret knowledge. The Word of God comes to us within the written text produced by authors eager to embody in their words the great tradition of Israel. Sometimes the author seems highly conscious of the privileged nature of his writing; sometimes it seems that the Scripture is something almost unknowingly produced, by someone deeply involved in some task or project. The letters of Paul are a good example. When we look at the *Letter to the Romans*, we are reading something which is clearly worthy of the name of Sacred Writing. Paul is consciously rhetorical, and consciously speaking with authority underwritten by God: see the beginning of each letter, where he states these credentials in round terms. It's an open question whether a rabbinic authority like Paul would ever have consciously expected his writings to be bound into the Bible. But sometimes he is clearly writing with the expectation of publication - read this to the church of the Laodiceans Col 4:16. On the other hand, it can hardly be claimed that the catty comments about his opponents in the circumcision contest, or the reporting of the damage done to Paul personally by Alexander the Coppersmith, show much sign of eternal context or resonance. These letters, after all, are working documents dictated - at speed and on the hoof - by a travelling apostle answering specific questions about specific churches. If we detect near-contradictions between various letters, that is no surprise, least of all to Paul who wrote:

With the Jews I made myself a Jew, to win the Jews; to those under the Law as one under the Law (though I am not) in order to win those under the Law; with those outside the Law as one outside the Law (though I am not outside the Law but under Christ's Law) to win those outside the Law. With the weak I made myself weak, to win the weak; I accommodated myself to people in all kinds of different situations, so that by all possible means I should bring some to salvation.

We shall have to do some hard work recognising the different modes in which literature works. You have already - though you may never have reflected on it - a sophisticated register for recognising the key to these different modes. Take television. Flicking across the channels, you will know instantly, for instance, whether you've alighted on a documentary or a Hollywood film. Go for the film. You will soon know whether it's a bodice-ripper, a sword-and-sandal epic, or a patriotic war film from 1942. The codes are written in quite

sophisticated sign-language: the suggestive woodwind which alerts you to the ripping of the bodice is quite different from the tantalising high violins that tiptoe round the blockhouse as the prisoners slip through the barbed wire. There is coding in camera use - the sudden zoom, the pan to a far corner where a significant face can be spotted amongst a crowd, and so on. The alarming presence of the Boston Symphony Orchestra where you thought we were silent upon a peak in Darien is something we have simply come to expect. A man from Mars would be very startled, and ask: *Who's making all those noises?*

In the same way we have a very intelligent attitude to the printed word. In the *Daily Mail* you can find news reports presenting authoritative sources for factual statements, and you give them credence as historical fact. You can find speculative theorising about fact, as yet unproved and honestly presented as tentative. You can find partisan propaganda, like *Blair Has To Resign This Week*, which uses the imperative mode, but without the least real authority; you treat that as a rant. The editorial voice speaks with measure and authority, but you keep trying to remember who owns the paper and pays the editor's wages. If you're wise, you remember who you are and why you bought this particular paper. On the back page you will find a cartoon about a Basset Hound who thinks and talks, and tries to make you laugh. I needn't labour the point. No-one is in any danger of treating, say, the horoscope as authoritative writing; everyone knows, without consciously spelling it out, the codes for the different kinds of writing that a paper contains.

When it comes to the Bible, it isn't so easy. If you read the chronicle of the life of David in the books of Samuel, you will be reading one of the greatest pieces of historical writing the ancient world has to offer. Its hero is faithfully presented, warts and crimes as well as charm and virtue: his astonishing skill with people and politics, his resourcefulness as a tactician, his weakness for his family and his roving eye for women: the ghastly crime he committed against all loyalty and friendship, when he contrived the murder of Uriah, followed by a sincere repentance, does not prevent him from making Bathsheba's son the heir to his throne. This writing carries conviction because of its merciless truthfulness. (It isn't so with the chronicles of Solomon, who has clearly employed spin-doctors with big ideas.)

What is less easy to arrange is the correct way to read Genesis. Waves of archaeological expeditions regularly set out from the Bible-belt Universities on the great summer sport of *The Hunting of The Ark*. Serious scholars can be found swarming over the multitudinous peaks of Armenia, trying to choose the right one upon which to dig for the remains of that mighty, divinely-ordained ship in which the seed-bank of the Creation breasted the waves of Noah's Flood. (Needless to say, they usually find its remains and, armed with aerial photography and endless climatology, they return to write articles in crackpot journals for the rest of their lives.)

If you suggest that the Ark is a fictional story, and not a Jewish one at that, they begin to accuse you of impiety and dismiss you as a dangerous atheist. What is in the Bible is Godstrewth, and can't be questioned or gainsaid without necrosis of the soul following on. It is of very little use to point out to these people that they already treat the Bible with quite a lot of subtlety; for instance, no-one takes as a piece of history the statement *God Is My Stronghold*. Or *The Lord Is My Shepherd*. A measure of poetry, then, is allowed; but if the Bible says *God Rested On The Seventh Day*, then that was when he rested.

There are endless degrees of fundamentalism. God created heaven and earth in six days. Some will insist on six twenty-four hour periods *just as the Bible says*. Others feel the need to identify the Six Days of Creation with six millennial periods of evolution, on the principle that with the Lord a day is like a thousand years. And a thousand years is like a day. The ease with which they find six convenient stages in the evolution of the Universe will speak volumes for the theory, and all will come away with honour intact. God does not lie. It's all there. It's in the Book!

In the same way you will find people offering scientific bases for the many things which make the Bible read embarrassingly like a fairy-story. This is always amusingly in dialogue with the current state of people's awareness. For instance, a tsunami strikes in Indonesia. Within months a theory is being provided whereby a tsunami providentially occurs exactly at the moment when the Israelites need to cross the Sea of Reeds. The waters retreat to let them across, and then the tsunami arrives, just in time to nobble the pursuing Pharaonic army. Off to the records, and guess what! Conditions are exactly right for this happening on a certain day during the reign of Rameses II, Egypt's most prestigious Pharaoh. We now even know the actual date the miracle of the Sea of Reeds took place. It's in the Book!

If we learn the different types of literature current in the ancient world, it will help us to stop treating everything in the Bible as the same kind of writing, and to become more respectful in our interpretation. Treat a myth as fact, and you miss the point of the myth and mire yourself in falsity; what's worse, everybody laughs at you and thinks the Bible is for simpletons.

We must therefore do a great deal of work in order to tune our headpieces for the Scripture. It isn't easy, but it's fascinating, and it's inspiring. It allows us to lift the ban on people's believing which fundamentalism causes. St Augustine was hampered in his coming to faith for years, simply because the text of Scripture he'd been offered to read was in barbaric Latin. In other words, he was prevented from hearing it, from giving it a fair hearing. If people are told they have to offend their common sense, and live in a constant state of suspended disbelief, how can they have faith in divine revelation?