

# DIocese of Nottingham Diaconate

## SCRIPTURE STUDIES

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*The Three Year Course will advance through the Bible, starting with the Old Testament theme of salvation, and using the historical development of the Hebrews' religious life to illuminate the central happening of religious history - the Incarnation, in which the world is redeemed.*

*Before embarking on this programme, however, we shall be staking out some important principles which govern the study of the Bible; and the first study-days will concentrate on these methodological principles.*

### THE TRUTH OF THE BIBLE

Many Christians, and that includes most Catholics, have a fairly fundamentalist view of the truth of the Bible. When you use a phrase like *Gospel Truth* you are bearing witness to a well-established belief that the Bible is the word of God, and there is nothing truer than the word of God. This is fine, but we need to examine what truth is and in exactly what way the Bible is true.

The notion that the Bible is simply inerrant in every line is still widely current. There are people who are so fundamentalist that they will not accept the possibility of any error, misconception, or partiality in the truth of any part of the Bible. If the Bible says Jesus rose from the tomb, he rose from the tomb. One minute he was lying dead in the tomb, the next minute he was on his feet and passing out of the tomb alive. If the Bible says Moses lived for one hundred and twenty years, then that is what it means and it is what happened. If the Promised Land was conquered by Joshua in one fell swoop, then that is how it happened, and the walls of Jericho came tumbling down at the blast of the Levitical trumpets, without as much as a penny firework let off in anger. If the Bible says Jonah spent three days in the belly of the whale, and that the Flood drowned every living thing outside the Ark, and that Adam and Eve damned the human race by eating a portion of fruit, then that is because this is the unvarnished truth, the historical fact. This is why Southern American Universities so regularly field expeditions to the top of what they consider to be Mount Ararat, looking for the timbers of the Ark, which, of course, they regularly find. That great scandal and irreligious horror, the theory of evolution, cannot ever be justified because the Bible says that the Creation is only four thousand-odd years old; and there this branch of Christian faith parts company with the modern world, which it probably never really liked anyway.

Of course, some stop short of the absolute break with modernity by deciding, for instance, that the seven "days" of creation are to be interpreted as seven periods of thousands of years - ice ages, etcetera - which allows the Bible to be *true* even in the modern world. Here we have quite an important point to make about the documents which make up the Bible, and if we can get this point across today, we will have achieved a very important thing. The point is that we do not think of the Scriptures as a divine production mediated through some

kind of automatic writing - such that the human author is inspired with the idea that God took six days to create the universe, but God was allowing him to write that because he knew that in fact it took six millennial periods of prehistoric time. There is in this way of thinking a kind of downgrading, or overriding, of the human mind, a reduction of the sacred author to a kind of fax-machine, which does not do justice to the Catholic understanding of inspiration. What we mean by "inspiration" is that God is communicating through the mind of the human author: what the human author meant to convey is what God wanted conveying. Fundamentalists are often ready to find codes, hidden meanings, amazing and huge systems of ulterior communications concealed in the Bible; they are even ready to augment these with mathematical conundrums drawn from the system of chapters and verses, which were imposed by Stephen Langton in the thirteenth century. This gives the whole business an immense gratuitous thrill, as the possibility that secret knowledge concealed from previous ages can suddenly dawn on twenty-first-century me in my study, and the whole world is transformed overnight. (It is worth admitting, in passing, that in Catholic circles, the same significance can often be attached to the seeing of visions, where favoured souls are suddenly charged with desperately urgent messages for the world.) When people who have decided to disbelieve religion attack us for superstitious and simpleton attitudes, they have plenty of evidence to marshal in their support.

That is what fundamentalism is like, and it is something we have to tackle before we can make real headway in our study of the Scriptures. The fact is that there is an almost infinite number of ways of expressing and of understanding truth, and the Bible contains a huge variety of expressions. These different types of expression are called *genres*, and if we want to read the Bible we have to learn how they work, and how they don't work. Anyone who wants to read the Bible intelligently must therefore be equipped with the talent of *recognising the different forms of literature* that are in it, and treating them appropriately.

Some of these literary forms are well-known to us, and will require less illumination than others: most of us have some idea of what a poem is, or a riddle, or a love-song, or a prayer in time of danger, or a piece of historical chronicling, or a proverb. The fact that these are contained in the body of Scripture may transform their importance, but we know basically how they work. Other forms of writing are quite strange to us, and need specialized technical knowledge for their proper understanding: who has any real knowledge of what a prophetic oracle is, or an apocalypse? Several of these latter forms are dangerous areas, because, not knowing the right way to understand them, we impose on them some mode of understanding of our own which does little justice to the real intentions of the author. One thinks of an obscure and anachronistic literary form like *apocalyptic*. We are not used to reading accounts of ultimate reality in conjunction with recognizably earthly history; the twentieth-century ear picks up this vast vision of an intoxicated menagerie of monsters, archangels, and psychedelic experiences, and decides that it is a sci-fi fantasy, or a hidden code, or a fortune-teller's portentous ravings. Such things may have been created precisely to echo the tone of the apocalypse, to give an extra edge to the superstitious manipulation of which cultural history is full. But the real literary world from which the apocalypse springs is operating in a very specific way, using an established system of writing. To understand what the original writer means, we have to do quite a lot of hard work, getting back into a foreign mindset in a pre-scientific world. As we have seen, the tendency to reduce the whole of the Bible to historical reportage does no justice to its richness; because this apparent book is in fact a library of books, with an extraordinarily wide range of literary forms. Be very wary of anyone who tells you anything beginning "The Bible says...". We can only hear the Word of God by understanding the mind of the man who wrote *the actual piece* we are studying. This is the Church's understanding of the place where revelation - in the scriptural sense - takes place. We have a notion that revelation takes place when we read the Scripture; but that is not strictly accurate in the scriptural context. Revelation in this sense takes place when the

writer of the book that is recognized as inspired *creates* his literary work. This task of creation is the actual inspired event. Our task, as readers and students of theology, is to recreate as far as we possibly can the context, and the mind of the author at the time of the work's composition. That is the primary meaning of the Scripture. To reconstitute it, we need to engage in various fields of study.

1. **Literary studies** include the studies of language, and of different languages, the various way in which words are used and terminologies develop, the study of literature and the diversity of literary forms, the history of the ideas treated in the work, the history of the document being studied: its literary background in the place where it was written, the stages of editing through which it has passed, the additions it may have received, the foreign documents which may have been inserted into it, and so forth. Much of this will be entirely new to us - so few of us are literary scholars. For instance, the Bible is full of writings which were not written by the people whose signature they bear. The Song of Solomon isn't by Solomon, and the Psalms of David are not by David, and the five books of Moses are not by Moses, and the 66 chapters of Isaiah are not by Isaiah, and the Letters of St Peter are not by St Peter, and the Letter of St Paul to the Ephesians is not by St Paul, and the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John have not more reason to be by those whose names they bear than to be by Peter, Paul, Mary, and James.

Part of the literary story of the Scripture is inevitably its translation into new languages. You may think that every English word has an exact equivalent in every other language, and that translation is just a matter of swapping terms, word for word. It's not true. There are things which defy carrying across into other languages, and they aren't to be understood except by a footnote spelling out the difficulty, and probably learning one or two untranslatable words. The Lord's Prayer as we recite it is a particularly wretched piece of translation, so it isn't a trivial matter.

Nor can we leave out the study of the interpretation which has been imposed upon texts in subsequent ages. In the *Tablet* the other day I read some conservative Catholic lady talking about the Pauline phrase (in 1 Corinthians) *discerning the Body of Christ* as if it referred to the recognition of the real presence in the Holy Eucharist. It is quite clear, if you read the context in Corinthians, that the primary meaning in Paul's mind was to do with discerning the needs of the poor - who also make up the body of Christ that is the Church. The imposition of later *Eucharistic* thinking on Paul's words represent a real distortion, which I am sure most people educated by nuns at the same time as me will have shared. If you want other examples there are many, some of them absolute howlers in very influential positions.

2. **Historical studies** include the archaeology of the area where the works were composed, the evidence we have of historical trends at the time of the composition, and the comparison with other intellectual and literary worlds existing at the same time that our Scriptures were written, the other civilisations whose lives may have impinged on the life of Israel. There is a whole world of scientific information about documents, texts, and the transmission of texts, which makes possible the study of a text for accuracy, for authorship, and for consistency; we can detect scientifically the work of another hand, through grammatical frequency, vocabulary, and so forth. The ramifications of such discoveries are endless, in literary (*what were the authors up to?*) and in theological terms.

3. **Theological studies** enable us to be as exact as possible about the meaning conveyed by the writer in his use of terms. This precision is important if we are to avoid imposing our meaning in place of the author's - which is, remember, what is inspired, what is the word of God. This makes it important to know how to tap into tradition - to sense the theological concerns that lie behind the writing through a proper grasp of what concerned the author, what impelled him to write; because where we find the inspiration behind Scripture, we are

very close to laying our hand on the inspiration of God, on what makes the Scripture uniquely precious and authoritative.

Theology is the discipline that teaches us how to speak correctly, truthfully, of God in the language of our day. If, after the reading of Scripture, you are going to speak about it to the people, you have to know how to frame your thoughts and responses in a way which helps them, but is above all obedient to the Scripture. This makes all the studies outlined above relevant to your training as a Deacon. This Course does not aim at teaching people to say kind, heartwarming things, or to crack jokes in Church, or to shout moral imperatives, or to chant doctrinal formulae. We want to equip people to convey the Word of God safely into people's modern minds, without distortion, reduction, or adulteration. It must come to them as a living word, not a piece of archaeologically-recovered protein. A deacon has to be a trustworthy servant of the word, as well as a trustworthy herald of the Church. For this to be true, it isn't enough for him to read the Bible a few times. He has to acquire as much skill as possible in the removal of misconceptions, the dust of the centuries, the distortions of culture and of community.

## **TRUTH IN THE HEART**

The truth of the Bible is one thing; the truth at home in our hearts is another. We must learn how to make ourselves at home in the Scriptures, so that our feelings can be engaged and our mental understanding deepen into love. Only in this way can we recreate the community in which the Scripture first resounded. These are writings of faith first and foremost, and if we want to be ministers of the word, we need to have our faith and our feelings bound up with the scripture we proclaim, and to which we have to hold a candle. The experience of the Liturgy is the first place where this must happen: in the readings at Mass, and in a very intimate way in the Divine Office, we make the word of God our own. The recital of the Psalms is a multi-dimensional exercise for this: because the Psalms do not only have one setting for us to recreate. We can sometimes recover the original inspiration for a psalm, especially when it fits into what we know of the Temple liturgy, for example, or the home-based liturgy of the Passover. But we also know that the Psalms are uniquely privileged works: they are the prayer book of Jesus, and when we remember that, we can pray them in an even deeper way with Christ. No-one who is a Christian need fear that a Jewish line like

*Into your hands I commend my spirit*

will have less meaning for him than it had for the Psalmist who wrote it in Ps 31.

In the same way our life of study must have, as its purpose, the enshrining of what we have understood in our hearts. When we can speak in the spirit of the Scriptures, we shall be speaking words that seem to come from God. We should therefore enter into this study with love and real joy, expecting to meet in it the God who saves us. I am saying this here, not because I think it a fine, pious thing to say, but because this ulterior level of understanding - perhaps we should call it by the old word "comprehension" - demands an ulterior effort on the part of the student. Canon Law is, I believe, impossible to pray about, and may be past praying for. Church history can be understood as contradictory to religion - the Church has not always borne witness to what is holy. Even theology is sometimes difficult to carry into prayer. But Scripture is already there. It is born and written down in a community of prayer, and if we allow it, it will teach us how to pray, and how to preach, and how to lead others to prayer. More importantly, we have not really read it ourselves unless we have allowed it to reach our holy place, the inner spaces of our heart.