

In planning for this evening we've been a bit in the dark, not knowing who we were going to be talking to. But the questions we wanted to answer are the same for everyone: why is the Bible important to us, why do we give it our attention and our reverence, and what do we do about all the problems it raises for us?

As a person trained in the study of literature, I don't think you can really encounter a book in translation. When I've been able to read books in French or Italian, and tried a translation afterwards, I've never felt that the translation really captured the original: certainly it was no kind of replacement for the immediacy of the actual words the author wrote. The Bible was written by Hebrews and Greeks, some of them nearly 4,000 years ago. Getting beside these people is going to be a formidable task for us, and the danger is that we neglect the task, reading their words in a totally alien atmosphere, imposing our mindset and attitudes on them without even being aware of the fact. This is especially true of those translations whose stated aim is to *modernise*, to make the ancient writings *relevant*; the implication is that we can, by some personal, instinctive chemistry of our own, update them, make them as if only written this morning.

So how can we think about this document, which was built up over 2,000 years, and which is so very foreign to our way of thought?

In the first place, we need to understand the concept of *revelation*; but I think we should be very realistic about it. There are various notions of the way revelation enters the world, some of them very fantastic. The Church does not think that it happens by automatic writing, or by people falling into a trance: the authors of Scripture are real, human authors, thinking what they should write and composing sentences just like Jane Austen or Charles Dickens; except that they are trying their best to embody the faith of their fathers, or the truth the Church had glimpsed in Jesus.

In what sense are, say, the Gospel writers *authors* in the real sense of the word? It's significant that none of the Evangelists has signed his name to his work, so we have no firm knowledge of who wrote the Gospels or even where and when. These men were not writing their memoirs, but putting into written form the preaching of the Church. Their intention was that, reading their work, other people would learn to believe in Christ. This is quite different from the intention of (for instance) a journalist or an historian, whose desire is simply to lay facts before us, even if he has his own reflections and interpretation to offer. This has profound implications for our understanding of the relationship between the Scriptures and the Church. It's quite clear, for instance, that St Paul lived most of his life without a written Gospel to read or to give out to his converts. For nearly two generations the Christian Gospel was word of mouth rather than Scripture; it may be that bits of it were written down in letters and suchlike: but certainly there was a substantial period of time when the Church baptised, and preached, and converted, and celebrated the Eucharist, without any Scriptures, without that slim volume we call the New Testament. It was not only the teaching of Christ that was eventually given written form in the four Gospels, but that globular experience of the earliest Church, for whom the communal life and the preaching of the kerygma constituted a revelation of God in Christ.

When the evangelists came to embody all of this in writing, they had a vast amount of material to include. How did they make their choice? The Fourth Gospel says that it was a hard task: if everything possible had been included, *the world itself would not have been large enough to hold all the books*. So a selection had to be made. And then what had been selected had to be given expression in a consistent and

cogent fashion, with the overall intent of providing the impulse to believe. This impulse could only have been valid by the reading of these books within the frame of the believing community, the echo-chamber which would give real sense to the message.

The Catholic view of Scripture, then, never sees Scripture as standing isolated from the Community in which it was born: in the Old Testament, the extended family of Abraham, the tribal gatherings of Hebrews, the pilgrim community of nomads, the nascent kingdom of David and Solomon, the struggling nation of Israel, dominated, conquered and re-conquered, exiled and liberated: in the New Testament, the Church finding its way from Judaea to the Empire, and the world.

This overview of a 2,000 year process of composition is important in answering the question, *Why read the Bible?* We read the Old Testament in order to listen to the voice of God as it resounded in the various ages of ancient Israel. But we also read it to discover how it resounded within the mind of that most significant of Israelites, the first-century Jesus of Nazareth. This is where he found the word of his Father, the textbook of his religion: in the Psalms we may read the way of prayer of Isaiah, but we also read the prayerbook of Jesus.

Now, it isn't just an imaginative leap to do this. It demands study, it involves us in questions we can do a lot to answer. We're very lucky. We've got archaeology, scientific history, literary analysis, computer investigation of vocabulary, amazing tools of forensic research to help us. Truly we know more about the Bible than ever before.

The most useful advance, to my mind, which scholars have made in reading Scripture, is the separating-out of different literary forms. I'm always uneasy when I hear, as I do on the radio most Sunday mornings, the phrase "*the plain teaching of Scripture*". I've never found it particularly plain, and the complexity is only clarified for me when I discover the particular form of literature that I'm reading. We all do this, to some extent, already: some statements of Scripture we accept as history; some as poetry; some as propaganda, some as epic myth. The attitude that everything in Scripture is, say, *historically* true would seem as daft to me as the allegation that all of it is poetry or all of it is myth.

One of our problems in reading correctly is, I submit, that the apparatus for signalling what genre we are in is missing. Few people know, for instance, what a parable is for; even the Evangelists appear to have a shaky understanding of it, if we are to judge by their consistent allegorising tendency. For instance, to read the book of Job as an historical biography would clearly be to miss the point; the way in which catastrophe is visited on Job should have alerted us to the fact that we are enjoying a dramatic discussion of the mystery of evil. Equally, most people reading the book of Jonah would, if permitted, readily perceive the features of a Hanna-Barbera cartoon, with the Almighty playfully swivelling the absconding prophet's boat, in which he proposes to evade the God of earth and heaven by relocating to Tarshish. The sequence with the castor-oil plant and the worm from the end is pure cartoonery, and I feel sure that someone somewhere has treated it to skilful expression in that medium.

Our problems with the Genesis account of Creation show clearly the danger of mistaking the genre of writing in the Bible. There are many ways of misunderstanding "the plain meaning" of this particular text. My own Church has defined the primary sense of Scripture as "the meaning the human author intended to convey" at the time of its writing-down. This is something we can only access by

a well-instructed research, which will allow us to set at a distance the impulses and prejudices of our own time, and