

PREFACE

In 1980, the Catholic Adult Education Centre for the Sydney Archdiocese published my *The Four Gospels: an introductory commentary*. In 1992 I was given the opportunity to do further research on the Gospels and in 1997 Chevalier Press published three separate commentaries: on Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Thanks to time given to me by the Provincial Council of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC), I was able to return to Rome in January 1998 to update my research on John. After completing the research, and after lecturing on John in the parish of Henley Beach, Adelaide, I feel ready to offer this volume to complete the series.

Everyone knows that there is something quite special about John. My six months in Rome turned out to be for me an exceptionally privileged time spent coming to share more intimately in the experience of the Beloved Disciple. My prayer is that I have been able to communicate some of this to you, the reader, through this commentary.

My thanks go to my religious congregation for giving me the opportunity to do this work, to Father Henry Bertels SJ, librarian of the Pontifical Biblical Institute for his unfailing generosity in making the library available to me, to Brother René Galière FSC, librarian in the General House of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (De La Salle), and to the parishioners of Henley Beach for their encouragement. A special thanks to my confrere, Father Paul Stenhouse MSC, for undertaking the publishing of this volume.

I wish to dedicate this book to my brother, Father Jim Fallon MSC who invited me fifty years ago to direct my life towards the Society of the Missionaries of the Sacred heart which has been my spiritual home ever since. All along the way he has been for me an example of humility and a loving friend and guide. He accepted to read my final draft and offered many comments with his accustomed wisdom.

Saint Paul reminds us: ‘It is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’ (2Corinthians 4:6). It is my prayer that this commentary may attract you in some small way to this same glory.

– Feast of All Saints, 1998

INTRODUCING THE GOSPELS

The story of Jesus

Our story is about a man called Jesus. He came from Nazareth, a small village in Galilee, and he was in his early thirties when he entered public life. His ‘career’ lasted only two or three years. In that short time he stirred something in people’s hearts that they could not forget. He sensed with intense accuracy the brooding dissatisfaction of his contemporaries and he challenged them to stop living in fear — of self, of other people and of God.

He urged them to stop hiding behind empty forms and to celebrate life through the wonder of prayer and the experience of love expressed in mutual service. His fearless preaching and his refusal to compromise brought him into conflict with those who exercised power in the land, both political and religious. After a very short time in public life he was crucified, just outside Jerusalem.

His death seemed to show him up as a dreamer, one in a long line of revolutionary idealists. It seemed that his friends had been fools to listen to him. A beautiful dream it had been, but it was buried with him in the garden. Stunned, his followers dispersed, some back to their jobs in places like Emmaus, others back to fishing on the lake of Tiberias. He had said that love was more powerful than hatred, than fear, than death. His own death seemed at first to prove him wrong.

But then something happened. Individuals among his followers and groups of them together had experiences that they could explain only as signs to them of his renewed presence among them. From a state of shock, they became convinced that, beyond death, he was alive. And if he was alive, then what he had said to them was indeed true; the hopes he had stirred in them were not in vain: we can be free; we do not need to act from fear; life can well up inside us like a spring; it is love that is all-important; life, whatever its mystery, does have a meaning; God is a Father, the source of our life; it is possible to live and to find peace, freedom and wisdom.

A wave of excitement ran through that small band of friends. They re-grouped and there began the amazing story of the Christian Church. The word spread. The quality of the lives led by these disciples of Jesus was very convincing. Many Jews and many non-Jews joined the movement (or the Way, as it was called). Communities sprang up throughout the eastern empire, in Rome, and in its western provinces. They were united by a way of life based on the memory of Jesus and they were sustained by faith in his active presence among them.

One of the foremost missionaries of that early period was Paul of Tarsus. We are fortunate in having a number of letters written by him in the 50’s and early 60’s of the first century. Since his ministry covered a period of some thirty years, we cannot expect his few extant letters to give us a complete picture of his preaching or of the ideas circulating during that period. Nevertheless they give us some insight into the central convictions that inspired a number of the early Christian communities.

Paul did not know Jesus personally, so his letters tell us very little about what Jesus said or did. They concentrate on the central fact and significance of the crucifixion and resurrection. Paul presents the Cross as a complete statement of the kind of love that Jesus epitomised: a love given unto death, a commitment never taken back, an absolute trust. He presents the resurrection as a vindication of all that Jesus stood for, and he reflects on the disciples' experiences of the risen Jesus present among them, challenging and sustaining them.

If we want to learn something of the life of Jesus before the crucifixion, we have to look beyond Paul to the gospels where we find the memories and reflections of those who knew 'all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven'(Acts 1:1-2).

Inspired writings

The gospels focus on Jesus. For his disciples they are the most compelling documents in the whole of the Bible. They have been a source of wonder and inspiration for millions of people in all cultures ever since they were written nearly two thousand years ago. If this is the first time you have decided to read them in a systematic way, you will find much that is familiar but also much that is new. Your deepest yearnings for life will be stirred as the text keeps your attention fixed on Jesus. In the starkness and simplicity of the humanity which he shares with us, he is the perfect expression of who God is in relation to us, and also of how we can give expression to our most mysterious and sacred experiences.

The gospels belong to what is known as the Bible, from the Greek word *biblia*, meaning books. The Bible is, in fact, a small library of books, composed between 1000BC and 100AD. Christians call it '*The Book*' because it is the record of the religious experiences which are at the heart of our culture.

It is made up of two closely interconnected parts, customarily called by Christians the Old (First) Testament and the New Testament. 'Testament', as in the expression 'last will and testament', means a personally guaranteed declaration of will. The First Testament, associated with Moses and the prophets, is a record of people's experience of God's presence and action during a thousand years of the history of Israel. The New Testament is seen by Christians to be the flowering or fulfilling of the First Testament. It is a record of God's self-revelation in Jesus. The four gospels form its central core.

For centuries people have been inspired by the writings of the Bible and especially by the gospels. They have recognised that the writings themselves have been inspired, for the breath of God breathes in and through them. Since the authors wrote out of their religious experience, and since God who inspired them also inspires us, we can hope and pray that this sacred literature will draw us also into communion with God.

Revelation

When a veil that is obscuring our vision is removed, we speak of experiencing a revelation. Reading a gospel can be just such an experience. As we contemplate Jesus, hear his words, and share the insights of those who knew him, depths of our own being are revealed to us, especially the longing we have for communion with God. The disciples on the road to Emmaus found their hearts burning within them as they listened to Jesus (Luke 24:32). His experience found an echo in theirs, and they recognised in him what they most desired. We too can have this experience.

The gospels are about Jesus, especially about how he reveals *God* – a word which expresses accurately something of the mystery that is at the heart of our religious search. The word ‘god’ is related to the Sanskrit *ghu* (‘call’), and can be translated ‘the one calling’ or ‘the one called’. We do not directly experience the transcendent God but we long to. At times we sense that we are being called by the One who creates us moment by moment and we sense ourselves calling in response. The one calling and the one called is the one we name ‘God’.

This call is beautifully expressed in the opening words of the Song of Songs. The author, wearied of hearing of God second-hand longs for intimate personal communion: ‘Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth’. He longs for God to attract him with his grace: ‘Draw me in your footsteps. Let us run’. Those who knew Jesus saw him as God’s answer to that plea. They heard him address God with the familiar expression *Abba* (‘dear Father’) and they sensed at the heart of Jesus’ actions and words an intimate communion with God. Jesus led them into a way of life in which they, too, could experience divine intimacy.

When those who knew Jesus looked upon his face, they saw there the radiant beauty (glory) of God. When they were encouraged by Jesus’ love, they knew that it was God who was forgiving them, loving them, and drawing them into ever deeper communion.

In the Book of Exodus, Moses gives expression to the profound human longing to ‘see God’. He longs to see God’s glory. In this complex and confused world he wants God to be radiantly manifest in such a way as to evoke wonder and praise (Exodus 33:13,18). Moses is told that it is not possible for him to have direct experience of the transcendent God (‘You cannot see my face’), but God does promise to reveal his mercy and graciousness, his steadfast love and faithfulness (Exodus 34:6). The radiant beauty (the ‘glory’) of God would be revealed to him through what God does in the world.

When those who knew Jesus looked upon his face, it was the glory of God which they saw revealed there. When they were encouraged by Jesus’ love, they knew that it was God who was forgiving them, loving them, and drawing them into ever deeper communion.

It is this religious experience that is at the heart of the gospels. Let us pray that, by seeing the face of Jesus more clearly, we might come to experience God’s glory in our own lives. Without this, any knowledge we might acquire may be only a distraction. The gospels are religious documents and can be read with profit only by a person who is willing to undertake a spiritual journey.

Most of us have dipped into the gospels or at least heard some of the stories about Jesus. This is not the same as exposing ourselves to a whole gospel. Perhaps, through a reflective reading of the gospels, we may be helped to give God a name from ourselves. Perhaps we, like Jesus, may learn to see God as the source of our life and of our love, our 'Father', our 'Mother'. Perhaps we too will learn to be disciples of Jesus and to live in a way that radiates to others something of God's wisdom and love. We, too, may learn that it is possible to live like Jesus a life of freedom and loving service, born of an intimate union with God.

Religion – a return to the heart

To read the gospels is to open ourselves to profound religious experience, for we will find ourselves being 'bound back' (Latin *re-ligo* from which, according to one opinion, the word 'religion' derives). We will find ourselves released from distraction, and *bound back* to the deepest experiences of our hearts. Saint Augustine gave the following advice to his contemporaries:

Return to the heart! Why are you running away from yourselves?
Why are you getting lost, outside yourselves, entering on deserted ways?
You are wandering aimlessly. Come back! To where? To the Lord!
It can be done without delay! Return immediately to your heart!
Exiled from your own self you wander outside.
You fail to know yourself, you who want to know the source of your existence.
Come back! Return to the heart ...
See there what you can learn about God, for the image of God is there.
In your inmost being dwells Christ.
In your inmost being you are being renewed after God's image.

– Tract on John 18.10.1

We return to our heart by entering the silence and wonder of the gospels, where we can look upon the face of Jesus, listen to his words and come to know what it is that moved his heart. The Bible will be a word of God for us if, while reading the text, we listen for the echo in our own hearts. This echo is the word inspired in us by the Spirit whom God has 'poured into our hearts' (Romans 5:5). In this way the reading of the sacred text becomes for us an invitation to dialogue with God.

Of course we are not meant to leave our intelligence behind when we pray. We are called to love God with all our minds as well as with all our hearts (Luke 10:27), and we would be foolish to follow without discernment every feeling and every 'inspiration' that we thought we were receiving when reading the Scriptures. But the fact remains that we should begin reading and end reading with the knowledge that we are entering a sacred place, and with the expectation that God is inviting us into communion with him as we read.

A sacred encounter

The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation from the Second Vatican Council reminds us that to enter into a gospel is to enter into a place of prayer:

God reveals himself ... to invite and receive into his own company (n.2).

Introducing the gospels

Growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on comes through the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts ... It comes from the intimate sense of spiritual realities which they experience (n.8).

In the sacred books the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children and talks with them ... The Word of God ... is strength for our faith, food for our souls, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life (n.21).

We might like to find a quiet place in our home or garden, or look out over the water, or sit under our favourite tree. We might like to light a candle in our room and open the gospel, or we might just take a few moments wherever we are out of our busy day. Whatever situation we can manage, let us begin by praying to be in touch with our own heart and with the Spirit of God who moves there and who speaks to us there and invites us to communion. We might choose a passage that attracts us, not fixing its meaning too tightly, but, like a child, playing with it, enjoying it. Let the text be like a mirror for us, a still pool in which we are looking to see what is reflected there. Or let it be like a candle flickering in the night and, as we delight in it, let us take note of the responding glow in our own hearts.

In the meantime, outside our periods of reflective reading, let us take up the journey of study, slowly and gradually. We will find that our mind and heart will become more and more enlightened, more and more open to the divine surprises that are in the text. Let us not be concerned about how much we do not know. Let us rather be grateful for whatever knowledge comes our way. It will enlarge the ways God can use the written word to speak to us, for God wants to be in communion with us.

As we do this we should stay in touch with the Church, the religious community within which the Scriptures were written, treasured and preserved, allowing our minds and hearts to be enriched by the long tradition of prayerful meditation that has gone on in the community from the first generation until now. This tradition does not represent the last word of interpretation. But many insights have been gained over the centuries and wise words uttered. We would be foolish to bypass them, deceived by the thought that our own personal understanding is unquestionably right, just because it is ours. We can learn too from the insights of our contemporaries by remaining open to the surprising new insights that the Spirit can bring to us through these sacred writings when they are shared with people of faith, as has been happening since the earliest times. Saint Ephraem, writing in the fourth century, has this advice:

Lord, who can grasp all the wealth of just one of your words? What we understand is much less than what we leave behind, like thirsty people who drink from a fountain. For your word, Lord, has many shades of meaning, just as those who study it have many different points of view. The Lord has coloured his words with many hues so that each person who studies it can see in it what he or she loves. The Lord has hidden many treasures in his word so that each of us is enriched as we meditate on it ... Coming into contact with some share of its treasure, you should not think that the only thing contained in the word is what you yourself have found.

– *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, I,18-19

Portraits of Jesus

When we read the gospels it is not difficult to find ourselves at times suffering from a certain bewilderment. We are faced with writings that are ancient and they can appear complex. The gospels were written in Greek, the language of communication throughout the Roman Empire of the day. It is not always easy to translate from one language into another, especially when that language was spoken by people living in a culture so different from our own. Furthermore we can find learned scholars disagreeing in their interpretation of the meaning of certain passages, and we might wonder what chance we have of reading the material properly when the experts fail to agree.

It is important not to give in to this feeling of helplessness for it is not a matter of grasping all or grasping nothing. No one has a perfect understanding of parenthood, but we can learn and we can enjoy our children as we learn. No one has the last word on any work of art, yet we can enjoy art and we can grow in our appreciation of it. Likewise, no one can claim to have a perfect understanding of this rich gospel material. We are all learning. Let us open our hearts to Jesus' Spirit whom he promised would guide us to all truth (John 16:13). Paul assures us: 'If you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you' (Philippians 3:15). My prayer and hope are that God may use this commentary to bring about in you an ever-deepening sense of who Jesus was for those who knew him best and of how he can attract you to a fuller and more meaningful life.

Before we begin, there is one thing about which we must be very clear. We cannot afford to be mistaken about the kind of writing that we are dealing with when we read a gospel. If we wanted to know something about Saint Francis of Assisi, for example, and we were given something to read about him, we would need to know whether we were reading something which he himself had written or something written by someone who lived with him and knew him well, or whether, on the other hand, we were reading something written centuries later by someone who was interested in him. Furthermore, the author may have been interested in biographical details, or he may have reflected on Saint Francis and written a play about him, or a novel, or a poem. All of these kinds of literature can give us true insights into the real Saint Francis, but we cannot afford to confuse historical biography with drama or poetry.

If someone were to show us a portrait of Saint Francis, we would be interested to know how lifelike it was, or whether the artist was interested in Francis' character rather than in how he appeared to the eye. If the colour of the eyes was a shade of purple, we would know that the portrait was giving us, not the colour of his irises, but a mood judged by the artist to be characteristic of Francis.

It will become obvious that the authors of the gospels were not interested in offering a careful, chronological record of the events of Jesus' public life. They were interested, very interested, in the real Jesus of Nazareth, but they wanted to convey what they had come to know about his character, especially about what he revealed to them of God.

Introducing the gospels

Their knowledge was based on what the real Jesus really did and really said, and sometimes they give us an accurate description of both. Their main interest, however, was in what Jesus meant to them. While this was the result of what Jesus' contemporaries had seen and heard, it grew also out of what people had come to perceive and understand as a result of many years of reflection, and in the light of their own and other people's experiences, both before and after Jesus' death.

Initially this may come as a disappointment. We might be tempted to want to know Jesus 'just as he was' rather than see him through the eyes of others. But then, how do we get to know anyone? Would I know your mother better if I saw her momentarily in the street or if I were to come across a portrait by a skilled artist who knew and loved her? In the latter case I might have to live with many unanswered factual questions, but I would surely be in touch with your real mother and would be receiving from the artist the gift of privileged insights into who she really was.

As regards Jesus, unfortunately we do not have anything he wrote. We have his words and actions as remembered and shared by those who knew and loved him. We must immediately add that the records we have are those which the community chose to preserve. This gives us an extra guarantee that they do represent the real Jesus and that they were judged to do so accurately and beautifully. Furthermore, we can be sure that they tell us what the hearts of Jesus' disciples were able to perceive through long years of contemplation, meditation and reflection. The gospels can take us straight to the heart of the real Jesus as he was known and loved by those closest to him. The diagram on the opposite page may help to illustrate this.

Starting from the top of the diagram, we have Peter and Matthew the tax collector, Mary the mother of Jesus, and the Beloved Disciple of the fourth gospel, all contemporaries of Jesus who watched and listened to him. They also reflected on what they were seeing and hearing and each of them was coming to his or her own deeper understanding of him. This was true during Jesus' life among them prior to his crucifixion, but their reflection did not stop then.

After Jesus' death, their own experiences, as well as their reflections on Jesus in the light of their continual reading of the sacred Scriptures, led them to ever deeper insights into his significance for them. They gave expression to this in the way they lived, in the way they attempted to build community, in the way they prayed and in their preaching and teaching.

Others who had not known Jesus personally came to know of him through them. Among these we find the authors of the four gospels. As will become clear in the following chapter, the author of the gospel according to Matthew was a second generation Christian. The same is true of the authors of the other three gospels.

Drawing on the experience of those who knew Jesus personally, the evangelists were inspired to communicate to their contemporaries the wonder of Jesus, with all the power of their faith-filled imaginations, as well as with complete fidelity to what they themselves had learned.

Symbolic imagery

As mentioned earlier, the gospels are a record of the memories and reflections of those who knew Jesus. Memories tend to have a life of their own. Often, with the passing of time, happenings which may have gone practically unnoticed take on more and more significance for us, while others gradually fade. We remember certain things because they somehow capture a special feeling or symbolise certain central characteristics of the one we love. Moreover, our experiences of a person are coloured by our feelings, our expectations and the whole cultural framework within which we live. When we come to communicate these experiences to others it is natural that we will choose a form that will most effectively share with them what has moved us deeply.

Even a very cursory glance at the gospels shows us how thoroughly Jewish the language and outlook are. It was natural for Jesus' contemporaries to see him in the light of the hopes and aspirations found in their sacred literature. When they came to express what Jesus had done and what he had meant to them, they did so in the language and imagery of the Old Testament. In the catacombs of Rome, no more than a century after the gospels were written, we find frescoes which depict scenes from the Old Testament that dramatically express the New Testament faith in Jesus as the one who saves from death. We should read the gospels with the same wonder with which we contemplate these frescoes, allowing the interplay of images to open our hearts to the inspiration that alone brings insight.

It seems that Jesus' death and resurrection were recorded in written form fairly early, no doubt as an aid to catechesis. The account of Jesus' death is surprisingly stark and matter-of-fact. Yet even here the story is illuminated by references to the prophetic writings. In this way the authors share the reflections of their communities on the inner meaning of Jesus' death as a revelation of God's fidelity to the promises contained in these ancient writings. The language, therefore, is often closer to poetry and drama than to prose.

For example, Mark, Matthew and Luke tell us that when Jesus died the veil of the temple was torn asunder (Luke 23:45). A modern reader, unfamiliar with the symbolism of the veil, might think that he or she is being told that, coinciding with Jesus' death, the veil separating the inner from the outer sanctuary was torn in two (presumably by God). Miraculous, perhaps, but hardly of great moment to anyone not directly concerned with the temple.

However, once we recognise the poetic character of the text and discover that the veil was a liturgical symbol of the conviction that it is not possible in this life, even in the temple, to look upon the 'face of God', the rending of the veil takes on a richer and more profound meaning. We are being told that Jesus' death removed the veil once and for all. Now anyone who wishes can look upon the face of the dying Jesus and see God revealed: revealed as love given unconditionally and to the end.

If we were to examine the text more closely we would find even further rich layers of symbolic meaning. Enough has been said here to demonstrate that to discover the torn veil we do not need to investigate the temple building, any more than we need an X-ray to prove that a person has a broken heart. This use of symbolic language cannot be stressed enough as we begin these reflections on the gospels. If the account of Jesus' death is stark, this is not the case with the resurrection narratives. They give expression to the wonder, surprise and excitement experienced by the disciples. They form a magnificent tapestry woven with exquisite art. As we shall see, the imagery is taken largely from the First Testament.

It is the same for the accounts of Jesus' ministry in Galilee and Judea. If we read them hoping to find a simple and straightforward chronological account of what Jesus said and did we are bound to be disappointed. The accounts are highly poetic and dramatic, and so they have to be, for their aim is not to present an exact record of a dead Jesus but to communicate to the readers, as powerfully as the authors are able, the profound significance of Jesus who is still living, and who is active in the lives of the authors and of their readers.

The gospels were written primarily with the risen and glorified Jesus in mind. They were written to aid the early Christian communities in their prayer by helping to bring them into living communion with the risen Jesus. The gospels express faith and aim to share it. They are unashamedly written by people who have grown to love Jesus and who want to convince others of his significance for them. It comes as no surprise that they use all the richness of their literary heritage to do so.

If we keep this in mind, the gospels may be for us, too, the medium through which we are touched by the living word of God. Seen in the reflected light of the gospels, our lives, too, may be seen to be touched by him; we, too, may have the good news revealed to us as we read. My task is to help you read the words with something of the freshness they had for those for whom they were originally written. Your task is to bring to the reading your whole life, and to be prepared for a journey of faith.

Fundamentalism and the literal sense of the Bible

The modern proliferation of fundamentalist sects has mis-educated people by insisting that they drag the poetic text of the gospels into the confines of more scientifically controllable prose. If we follow their lead, everything has to be read without imagination and without any care to investigate the literary form being employed by the gospel writers. In its brief but excellent summary of the errors of fundamentalism, the Pontifical Biblical Commission states:

The basic problem with fundamentalist interpretation is that, refusing to take into account the historical character of biblical revelation, it makes itself incapable of accepting the full truth of the Incarnation itself ... It refuses to admit that the inspired Word of God has been expressed in human language and that this Word has been expressed, under divine inspiration, by human authors possessed of limited capacities and resources.

– The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, 1993, page 73

Introducing the gospels

God has revealed himself to the inspired authors within the limits of their experience and knowledge. Guided by the Spirit of God, these authors have communicated revealed truth using appropriate literary forms. It is our task to go beyond their words to the spiritual experience and insight which these words intend to express. Origen, the first great Scripture scholar and head of the catechetical school of Alexandria early in the third century, gave the following warning to his contemporaries:

The reason why all those we have mentioned hold false opinions, and make impious or ignorant assertions about God, appears to be nothing else but this, that Scripture is not understood in its spiritual sense, but is interpreted according to the bare letter.

– De Principiis 4,2

In his commentary on the Gospel of John composed about 234AD he writes:

How can one be said to believe the Scripture in the proper sense when one does not perceive the meaning of the Holy Spirit in it which God wants to be believed rather than the intent of the letter.

– 10.300

The Church historian, Eusebius, writing in the first years of the fourth century, quotes Philo as referring to Christians in the following text. Even if Eusebius is wrong in his understanding of Philo, his use of the text indicates how he himself thought Scripture was to be interpreted:

They expound the sacred scriptures figuratively by means of allegories. For the whole law seems to these people to resemble a living organism of which the spoken words constitute the body, while the hidden sense stored up within the worlds constitutes the soul. This hidden meaning has first been particularly studied by this sect which sees, revealed as in a mirror of names, the surpassing beauty of the thoughts.

– Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 2.19

All the early commentators were well aware of the need to penetrate below the surface meaning of the words. John Chrysostom in his homilies on the Gospel of John given in Antioch about 390AD has this to say:

If you listen to what is written in the Scripture without examining the meaning and take everything in its literal sense you will get many strange notions ... You will rid yourselves of these strange notions by examining the sense that lies deep within.

– Homily 15

We will need God's abundant grace lest we go no further than the bare words. It is in this way that the heretics go astray, because they seek to know neither the point of view of the speaker nor the attitude of his hearers.

– Homily 40

Augustine (354-430) writes:

When Ambrose lifted the veil of mystery and disclosed the spiritual meaning of texts which, taken literally, appear to contain the most unlikely doctrines, I was not aggrieved by what he said, although I did not yet know whether it was true.

– Confessions 6.4

I made up my mind to examine the holy Scriptures and see what kind of books they were. I discovered something that was at once beyond the understanding of the proud and hidden from the eyes of children. Its gait was humble, but the heights it reached were sublime. It was enfolded in mysteries, and I was not the kind of man to enter into it or bow my head to follow where it led. But these were not the feelings I had when I first read the Scriptures. To me they seemed quite unworthy of comparison with the stately prose of Cicero, because I had too much conceit to accept their simplicity and not enough insight to penetrate their depths. It is surely true that as the child grows these books grow with him. But I was too proud to call myself a child. I was inflated with self-esteem, which made me think myself a great man.

– Confessions 3.5

We conclude with a statement by Maxentius (580-662):

If the letter is not understood according to the spirit, then it can be grasped only with the senses, which means that what it has to say is restricted and the force of what is written is not allowed to sink into the mind. Therefore, let us not put under a bushel the lamp (that is, the enlightening word of knowledge) which we have lit by spiritual contemplation and action. Let us not be guilty of restricting by the letter the incomprehensible force of wisdom. Let us put it on the lamp stand (By which I mean the Church), where on the heights of true contemplation it may hold out to all the light of divine teaching.

– to Thalassius, quaestio 63

The meaning of the text

We have stressed the importance of listening to the response of our own heart to the gospel text. From what we have said so far, it should be clear that it is important also to focus careful attention on the text itself. For there is a problem if our attention is only on our own responses: we may be unable to grasp any meaning that lies beyond our present mental horizon.

Scholarly research continues to open up for us the precise nuance of the words used by the sacred authors as well as the literary forms which they employ. Scholars also alert us to the social and historical context within which the various books of the Bible were composed and the communities to which they were addressed. The understanding to which this leads gives the text the power to shake us free from our false assumptions. It can call us to radical conversion, and this will be helped by our knowing, not just how we respond to the text, but what the original author was asserting when he wrote it, and why the original readers thought it worth preserving.

It is important to recognise that rarely can a text be said to have one and only one meaning. This is especially true of texts that make liberal use of imagery, and the gospels come into this category. Furthermore, even if we could accurately pinpoint the meaning intended by the writer, what is actually written will often contain meanings of which the author was not conscious. Moreover, those who kept the text may have kept it for reasons other than those originally intended by its author.

Introducing the gospels

When the Jewish rabbis were studying their sacred texts, they were very conscious of the fact that the text was inspired by God, and so they attempted to find as many meanings as possible in it. They recognised that God is mysterious, and they were on the look out for all the glimpses of the mystery that they could find. They were fond of quoting the words of Jeremiah: ‘Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?’ (Jeremiah 23:29). Flint struck by a hammer shatters into a myriad splinters of light. The word of God is no less rich, and the Rabbis wanted to be open to the many ways in which God could enlighten them through it.

We find the same attitude in the early Greek and Latin commentators on the Gospels. We can learn from them. It is right that we play with the Scriptures as a child might play with a fountain or with a prism, delighting in the splash of water or in the changing colours and reflections of light. It is right that we attempt to break open the word to see the sparks of divine light that emerge from it.

We owe an immense debt of gratitude to scholars of more modern times who have developed better scientific controls to aid us in our search for a more authentic reading of ancient texts. As we play with and delight in these sacred words, the scholarly pursuit is there to guide us in discovering the intended meaning of the text. The meaning which the author intended his readers to attain does not exhaust the meaning of the text, but it will always be foundational and a corrective against conclusions that we might attribute to the inspired author and so to God but which come from our own fancy, prejudice, or mistaken assumptions.

Paul wrote to Timothy: ‘All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness’ (2Timothy 3:16). As a matter of fact, Scripture is used with all the effects mentioned by Paul. However it is also a fact that Scripture is misused with exactly the opposite effects as well: for disseminating error and for guiding people’s lives in wrong directions. Jesus used Scripture with beautiful insight; some of his contemporaries used it to condemn him. We find the same diversity in the way people use Scripture today.

Since we are quite capable of misunderstanding conversations and written material that belong to our own immediate culture and times, it is not surprising that we may misunderstand the sacred Scriptures which were written in Greek to be read by people nearly two thousand years ago within a culture very different from our own. Knowing how words were used and understood two thousand years ago is by no means a simple task.

Even today we can easily find ourselves misunderstanding a contemporary from another cultural background. We may understand the words, but fail to grasp the intention. We hear what is said but we hear it from within our own horizon of experience and thinking. It may not even occur to us that we need to change our perspective if we wish to engage in meaningful communication. If this is so today, how can anyone readily presume to grasp immediately what Mark or Matthew or Luke or John meant by the words they used? Without such knowledge we should be slow to be dogmatic about the exactness of our understanding of a text. There are a number of basic principles which we need to keep in mind.

God's word in human words

The first principle is that the Sacred Scripture is, indeed, God's word, but expressed in limited human words. As the Second Vatican Council pointed out [Dei Verbum n.13]:

The words of God expressed in human words are in every way like human language, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when he took on himself the flesh of human weakness, became like us.

When we look at Jesus, we do not see God in God's transcendent being. We see God as God has chosen to be revealed in the limitations of the human. When we listen to the words of the gospels, we do not hear God communicating with us in some ethereal, transcendent, superhuman way that bypasses history and human experience.

We hear God mediated through people who gave expression to their religious experience in words that have all the wonderful qualities of human language, but also its unavoidable limitations. Augustine reminds his congregation that John, though inspired by God, was still a human being, and so:

did not express the entire reality, but said what a human being was capable of saying.

– Tractate on John 1.1.2

It is precisely within the limited human condition of Jesus that the divine shines out so beautifully and so convincingly. The same is true of the gospels.

The human authors wrote from within different horizons. John did not know what Mark knew, so we cannot expect them both to see everything from the same point of view. Both were ignorant of many things. Both worked sometimes from assumptions that were mistaken. Both grew in insight. Both forgot. Both were human.

It is also true, however, that both responded to the encounter with the one God which they found in Jesus and both gave expression in writing to their religious response in ways that the Christian community valued as inspired. The wonder of Jesus is that it is precisely in his humanity that he reveals God. The beauty of the Bible is that in these human documents, born of inspired prayer, God speaks to us. The words of the Bible are the 'words of God' in this mediated sense.

What is the author asserting?

The second principle is that truth is found in what the inspired human authors *assert as true*. God inspires real people. To be the recipient of religious insight inspired by God and to be able to give expression to that insight, one does not need to be knowledgeable about everything. Inspiration is compatible with all kinds of error, except in the precise area of the inspiration:

Since all that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, assert should be regarded as asserted by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures.

– Dei Verbum, n.11

Introducing the gospels

The ‘truth which God wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures’ is the insight which God inspired in the author and which the author expressed in his words. We can be confident in its truth because of the way the words were received and treasured by the people of faith who preserved them. So, if we wish to be open to the word of God that is expressed in the human words of the gospels, we must look precisely for what the author wrote from his inspiration; we must look for the truth that accounts for the writing being preserved by the community of faith.

The authors were people of their time, and their writings express many of the limited viewpoints of their contemporaries, many of their false assumptions, many of their mistakes and errors. But in their writings we can also find inspired insights that disclose something of the mystery of the transcendent God revealed in Jesus. We should always ask ‘What is the author asserting?’ He may be recording history. He may be using material that is closer to what we are familiar with in an historical novel. He may be composing a fable or drama or proverb, or perhaps a hymn, or epic or legend. He may be presenting a parable. He may be creating an allegory or a lament. The form he uses depends on his judgment as to how best to communicate the truth about Jesus which he has been inspired to share.

Obviously, all these and other forms of literature can express religious insight and so mediate divine revelation. Each of them has its own way of expressing truth and we will find examples of many different literary forms in each of the gospels, for the authors were interested in history, but they were also interested in teaching, in providing a catechism for believers, in converting outsiders, and in defending the Christian community against attack.

Remembering that the medium belongs to the essence of the message, and that poetry is to be read in a different way from prose, we try to open ourselves to the richness of the literature, allowing it to invite us into the religious experience which it expresses. If in our search for clarity we want to express in clear, explanatory language the truth communicated by the text, we should recognise the limits of attempting to do this, and the necessity of knowing the kind of literature with which we are dealing. We must discover not just what the author says, but what he intends to assert as true. This is the ‘literal sense’ of the text.

Seeing that, in sacred Scripture, God speaks through people in human fashion, it follows that the interpreter of sacred Scripture, if he is to ascertain what God has wished to communicate to us, should carefully search out the meaning which the sacred writers really had in mind, that meaning which God had thought well to manifest through the medium of the words.

– Dei Verbum, n.12

Reading a text in its proper context

We will be examining each passage of the gospel in turn. However, from the beginning it is important to note a third basic principle: we must see each passage within the context of the whole gospel. If we are studying a poem or a drama we know that we cannot take one line or one scene, separate it from the rest, and claim to understand it properly. It belongs to the whole and must be read as part of the whole. It is the same with music or painting or architecture.

A flower arrangement may be ‘inspired’, but the same could hardly be said of a small twig taken out of the arrangement and placed on its own in a vase. It is the same with the gospels. If we take a phrase out of the gospels and use it to prove a point, we usually end up distorting the truth. Extracts must be read in the light of the whole work and any particular gospel must be read as part of the whole Bible.

Reading a text while being attentive to God’s inspiration

In attempting to protect his readers against bad teaching, the author of the First Letter of John wrote: ‘The anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. His anointing teaches you about all things ... abide in him’ (1John 2:27). Commenting on this statement, Augustine writes:

The sound of my voice strikes your ears, but the real Teacher is within. Do not think that one learns anything from another human being. We can draw your attention by the sound of our voice; but if within there is not the one who instructs, the noise of our words is in vain ... The internal Master who teaches is Christ the teacher; his inspiration teaches. Where his inspiration and anointing are not found, the external words are in vain.

– Tractate on John 50.6

This writer and any one else commenting on the Scriptures would want to say the same. We are daring to explore a sacred text. Let us be mindful of the word of God spoken through Isaiah:

I will look to the one who is humble and contrite of heart, who trembles at my word.

– Isaiah 66:2

In his introduction to the document from the Pontifical Biblical Commission entitled ‘The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church’ (1993), Pope John-Paul II has this advice:

To arrive at a completely valid interpretation of words inspired by the Holy Spirit, one must first be guided by the Holy Spirit, and it is necessary to pray for that, to pray much, to ask in prayer for the interior light of the Spirit and with docility to accept that light, to ask for the love that alone enables one to understand the language of God who is love. While engaged in the work of interpretation, one must remain in the presence of God as much as possible.

If we approach the sacred text in a prayerful way, we may, please God, come to share the faith of its author and his vision of the person who inspired that faith, Jesus of Nazareth. As we journey together, let us pray that we come to ‘the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’ (2Corinthians 4:6).