

The Bible: Introduction (III)

Sunday 12th July 2020

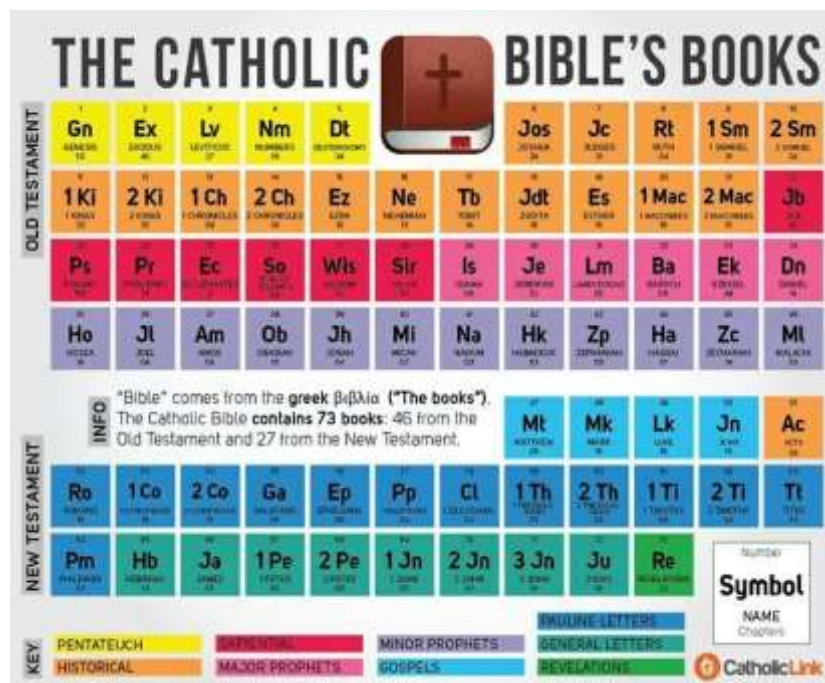
Last week we refreshed our memory about biblical referencing, this week in our final introductory part, we begin looking at interpreting Scripture.

'In Sacred Scripture, God speaks to man in a human way. To interpret Scripture, the reader must be attentive to what the human authors truly wanted to affirm, and to what God wanted to reveal to us by their words.' (#109 Catechism)

The Second Vatican Council described three points that were needed for interpreting Scripture in accordance with the Holy Spirit who inspired it.

Point Number One

'Be especially attentive 'to the content and unity of the whole Scripture'.
(#112 Catechism)



The word 'Bible' comes from the Greek 'Biblos', meaning many books. Think of a bibliography that contains all the books used by an author in their writing; or the French word for a library, 'Bibliotheque', a building that contains many books. The Bible physically appears as one book, but it actually is composed of a whole collection of sacred texts, written at different times and presented through different literary genres – history, law, poetry, letters etc. The Bible may be composed of different books but what unifies it is the one true Word of God – Jesus Christ.

To further explain this I want to present you with an argument that is often incorrectly put forward; *'Christians don't need the Old Testament so what's the point reading it?'* The premise for this is that the Old Testament books were written before Jesus became man and was born to Our Lady at Bethlehem and therefore, they have nothing to offer or indeed reveal which will help a Christian live as a disciple. Sadly, when people adopt this argument they end up missing out and obscuring who Jesus really is. It is by being attentive and reading the content of the of the Bible that we see how every part of it, no matter how obscure it may initially seem, works in unity to help us to hear and see God's revelation of who Jesus truly is.

For example, let's look at the Transfiguration in the Gospel of Saint Matthew (read Mt 17:1-8 for the full account).

'There in their presence he was transfigured: his face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as light. Suddenly Moses and Elijah appeared to them; they were talking with him.' (Mt 17:2-3)

At a first glance the Transfiguration simply seems to show that Jesus' physical appearance changed before his disciples. So what? How does this help me as a Christian understand the Lord any better? It doesn't until we turn to the Old Testament and see how its language and imagery shed light upon what is really taking place at the Transfiguration.



In the Old Testament God often spoke and revealed Himself to prophets and patriarchs on mountain tops.

'Moses was looking after the flock of Jethro...He led his flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him...' (Ex 3:1-2)

'The Lord said to Moses, 'Go to the people and tell them to prepare themselves today and tomorrow... because on the third day the Lord will descend on the mountain of Sinai in the sight of the people.' (Ex 19:10-11)

'Then he [Elijah] was told, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord.' Then the Lord himself went by...' (1 Kg 19:11)

The Transfiguration took place on a mountain '*...and [Jesus] led them up a high mountain...*' (Mt 17:1). Straight away we the reader, knowing the Old Testament, are in ready expectation to encounter God; For it is on mountains that God shows Himself. With this insight the initial changing of Jesus' appearance takes on a more significant meaning. God is revealing Himself to be present in the person of Jesus Christ. The Transfiguration isn't just Jesus showing his disciples he's different from other people. No. By reading and knowing the whole of Sacred Scripture the Transfiguration reveals that Jesus is showing himself to be divine, he truly is the Son of God who has come to save the world.

I give this example to illustrate what the Church teaches;

'Be especially attentive 'to the content and unity of the whole Scripture'.

The books of the Old Testament may have been written before the Incarnation of the Lord but it does not make them redundant after the Nativity. These ancient texts of various genres foreshadow and prefigure the person of Christ. They help to cast light and understanding on the New Testament thus allowing us to truly know our Lord better. To pick and choose, accept and reject parts of the Bible rather than embracing it as a whole and unified work, prevents us from receiving God's divine revelation and therefore we become people who live in darkness.

Point Number Two

The second point the Church asks us to keep in mind when reading the Bible is:

***'Read the Scripture within "the living Tradition of the whole Church". According to a saying of the Fathers, Sacred Scripture is written principally in the Church's heart rather than in documents and records, for the Church carries in her Tradition the living memorial of God's Word, and it is the Holy Spirit who gives her the spiritual interpretation of the Scripture'* (#113 Catechism)**

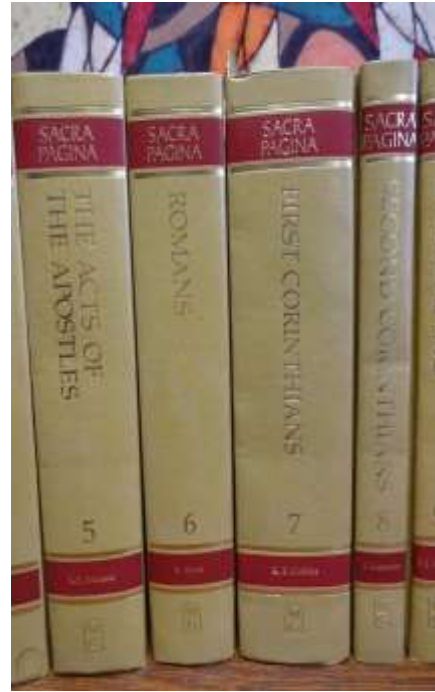
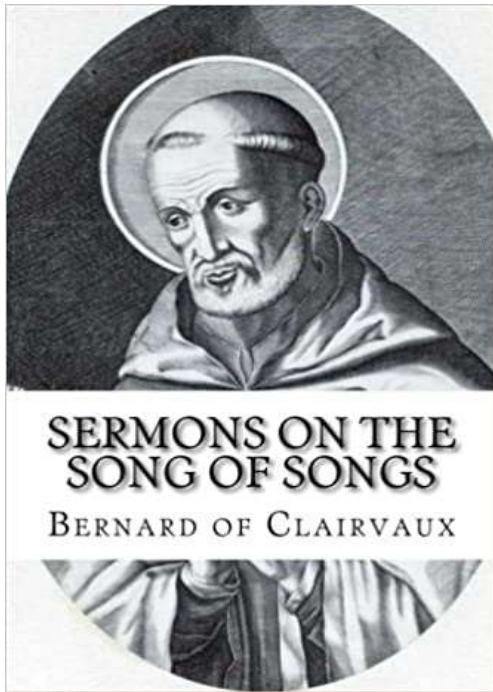
In other words when we begin to interpret the Bible we are not alone but have the help of the Church. From the moment Jesus established his Church on the rock of Saint Peter, our first Pope, all the way down through the ages she has passed on her experience, knowledge and understanding granted her by the grace of God. Remember those words of the Lord to Saint Peter.

***'Jesus replied, 'Simon son of Jonah, you are a happy man! Because it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. So I now say to you: You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church. '* (Mt 16:17-18)**

The Church, in every generation has had various gifts bestowed on its members, by the Holy Spirit, to help us understand God's words in Scripture. From the first hand knowledge of the apostles, like St. Peter, who have handed this down to successive generations in the Catholic Church, through to the Saints, biblical scholars, historians and linguists. The Church has a wealth of experience, knowledge and wisdom to impart in order to help us listen to God in the Bible.

'...Holy Tradition transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit. It transmits it to the successors of the apostles so that, enlightened by the Spirit of truth, they may faithfully preserve, expound, and spread it abroad by their preaching.'
(#81 Catechism)

Though I have been blessed as a priest to have had time to learn and study the Bible I still need continued formation and help in listening to God's Word speak to me through it. The Church has blessed us in so many resources to help us do this.



The images above are just some biblical commentaries, both old and new, that have been produced by saints and scholars of the Church to help us tune into God's revelation through Scripture. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, a great medieval Cistercian monk and mystic, wrote a commentary on the Old Testament text, 'The Song of Songs'. He read, studied and prayed with it daily and produced a work that is still being printed today to help people hear God speaking to them about His love for His people. The other picture above shows some commentaries produced by 21st century biblical scholars who have studied both the history and language of the New Testament books. Again, like St. Bernard, the purpose in writing these study aids was to help the Church continue to know God through His sacred word.



I first saw the above painting last year at the Lady Lever Art Gallery. It is called '*The Scapegoat*' and was painted by William Holman Hunt in the 19th century. When I saw it, I was struck by the bleak beauty of colour and landscape. To merely have looked at the picture, to have only appreciated what I could see then and there, would have done Holman and his work an injustice. The visual experience only informed me of so much. It was the background knowledge that helped to give me a richer experience of this painting. Let me explain.

The Scapegoat finds its origins in the Old Testament. To be exact we see it in the book of Leviticus (Chapter 16), where Aaron is told to take two goats. One will be sacrificed for God and the other will take on the sins and failings of the community and be driven out into the wilderness, far, far away. This exiled goat carrying the sins of the people is the scapegoat.

'The goat whose lot was marked for Azazel shall be set before the Lord, still alive, to perform the rite of atonement over it, sending it out into the desert...'

(Lv 16:10)

This biblical knowledge then allowed me to see the desolate solitude that Holman was conveying in his painting through the arid landscape, the sorrowful goat and the images of death. What continued to help my experience of 'The Scapegoat' was those words we pray at Mass before Holy Communion. '*Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi*' (Lamb of God you take away the sins of the world). When I saw Holman's Old Testament scapegoat and I remembered those words from Mass, I saw the prefiguration of Jesus on the Cross. The merciful God who took on our sins and forgave us on the Cross at Calvary. Like Holman's creature the Lord found himself exiled, alone and isolated for the redemption and atonement of sinners.

To have just seen this painting in the art gallery may have caught my interest but because of scriptural knowledge and the tradition of the Mass prayers I was able to gain a greater appreciation of this 19th century painting. This is how the Church with her wealth of wisdom and experience helps us to understand the Bible better. With greater knowledge God's words are not just printed text on paper but living words calling to us personally.

Point Three

Be attentive to the analogy of faith. By "analogy of faith" we mean the coherence of the truths of faith among themselves and within the whole plan of Revelation. (#114 Catechism)

To understand this final point let's look to an attack that is often used against us a Roman Catholics. '*Catholics don't know the Bible and make up their own rules!*' Our Faith, our Church, our Tradition and our Teachings are rooted and grounded in Sacred Scripture. Our prayers, liturgies, devotions and instructions are never contrary to the Bible.

For example, if I was to ask a parishioner to quote from the first chapter of Luke they may say, '*I have no idea Father!*' However, they would be wrong because I know that they do quote from Luke chapter one on a daily basis. I know they recite those words of the angel Gabriel found in the Gospel when they say: '*Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.*' (Read Lk 1:26ff for full account). And they also imitate the words of Elizabeth when they pray:

'Of all women you are the most blessed, and blessed is the fruit of your womb...'
(Lk 1:42)

Another argument that is used against us is our belief in praying for the dead. Some people state that prayers of intercession can only help the living and that having Requiem Masses and prayers for the dead is wrong. Again, as Catholics we pray for the dead because of what is found in Sacred Scripture.

'...This was why he had this atonement sacrifice offered for the dead, so that they might be released from their sin.' (2 M 12:45)

The Eucharist, we are told by some people, is only symbolic and not what you believe it to be – The Real Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ. Again, our Catholic faith is rooted in Jesus and the words he gave us through the Gospel.

*'I tell you most solemnly,
if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man
and drink his blood,
you will not have life in you.
Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood
has eternal life,
and I shall raise him up on the last day.
For my flesh is real food
and my blood is real drink.'* (Jn 6:53-55)

The original Greek of this gospel account is even more explicit than the translation. With the experience and knowledge passed down by the apostles who were with our Lord and the benefits of those who have studied Scripture our belief in the Eucharist is not misplaced.



If you look through the Catechism of the Catholic Church you will see how rooted our Faith in Scripture is. Catholics may not always be able to quote chapter and verse of the Bible off hand but they live and pray with it daily, sometimes not even consciously knowing that they are doing it.

So, there are our three points for interpreting the Bible in accordance with the Holy Spirit.

1. Read the whole of Scripture and not just select and dissect it. The whole of the Bible's content is unified in revealing God's Word – Jesus Christ.
2. The Church with her wealth of personal knowledge, experience and wisdom, given by God, helps us see and hear the Lord in the sacred texts of the Bible.
3. Our living Catholic Faith and beliefs are not contrary or dissenting to Sacred Scripture.

Next week we will begin to look at the first five books of the Bible often known as the Pentateuch or Torah.

God Bless and keep praying
Fr. O'Brien