

# Diocese of Leeds

## Vicariate for Education



## A Guide to Reading the Scriptures

*Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.<sup>1</sup>*

What do we mean when we say that God speaks to us in the Scriptures?

In his apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*, Pope Benedict XVI taught that, first of all, when we speak of the Word of God we mean Jesus, the *Word made flesh* in the teaching of John's gospel.

Throughout history and all of creation, God speaks to humankind a single Word expressed in many ways; the Scriptures are a reflection of this 'many-voiced hymn' which is handed on from generation to generation in the Tradition of the Church.

*Consequently, the Scripture is to be proclaimed, heard, read, received and experienced as the word of God, in the stream of the apostolic Tradition from which it is inseparable.<sup>2</sup>*

We read the Scriptures not as a flat, dull text but as the living active Word of God speaking now to us.

God's Word to us is creative; it is Revelation; it is food for our journey in life.

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 1:1-2

<sup>2</sup> *Verbum Domini* 7, cf. *Dei Verbum* 10

*All divine Scripture is one book, and this one book is Christ, speaks of Christ and finds its fulfilment in Christ.*<sup>3</sup>

When the Scriptures are read in the liturgy, 'Christ... is present in his word, since **it is he who speaks** when Scripture is read in Church'.<sup>4</sup> The power of the Word is 'accompanied by the interior working of the Holy Spirit who makes it effective in the hearts of the faithful'.<sup>5</sup>

In the Bible, God speaks 'through human beings in human fashion':<sup>6</sup> God's Word is *for us* and speaks directly to us in the day-to-day of our lives.

## **How should we read the Scriptures?**

All human language needs to be understood *in context*. Therefore, Scripture *as the Word of God* is to be read in its human context: it is God's Word *for us*.

The human context should be understood in two ways:

- the culture in which the text was first written and the living Tradition of the Church (this includes the **kind** of text it was understood to be at the time of its writing and in the centuries thereafter)
- the lived human experience of the present moment (this means **our lived experience as Christ's Body**: Scripture is never read separately from our shared life as Church).

No Scriptural text stands alone: it cannot be 'plucked-out' and quoted as proof *in itself*: the text must be understood with care within the body of holy Scripture as a **whole**. St. Augustine taught that all interpretations of Scripture, particularly those which depart from the literal text, must be judged by how they help us to fulfil the central commandment of **love**.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Verbum Domini 39

<sup>4</sup> Verbum Domini 52

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Verbum Domini 34

<sup>7</sup> De doctrina Christiana

## Different Kinds of Scripture

The Bible is a collection of many ancient texts: originally songs and stories handed on from generation to generation, these began to be written down about 1000BCE. These texts are rooted in the **lived experience** of communities and, as such, express humanity's journey in faith towards God Who reveals Himself to humankind throughout creation and salvation history.

These texts are of many kinds:

- The Narrative of Salvation History<sup>8</sup>
- Legal Texts<sup>9</sup>
- Prophecy<sup>10</sup>
- Song and Poetry<sup>11</sup>
- The Proclamation of Salvation<sup>12</sup>
- The Pastoral and Theological Letters<sup>13</sup>

Whilst speaking to us as truly the word of God, they should be understood also as intended by their human authors.

## Reading Suggestions

**The SPCK Bible Guide**, by Henry Wansbrough, SPCK Publications, 2013  
**101 Questions & Answers on the Bible**, by Raymond E. Brown, Paulist Press, 2003

**An Introduction to the New Testament (Abridged)**, by Raymond E. Brown, Yale University Press, 2016

**The Gift of Scripture (New Edition)**, by the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, Catholic Truth Society, 2013

**Dei Verbum** (1965), Vatican Council II, Dominican Publications 2014

**Verbum Domini**, by Pope Benedict XVI, Catholic Truth Society, 2010

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<sup>8</sup> e.g., Genesis, Exodus, Joshua, Judges, and Samuel

<sup>9</sup> e.g., Leviticus, and Deuteronomy

<sup>10</sup> e.g., Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Baruch

<sup>11</sup> e.g., Psalms, and Lamentations

<sup>12</sup> The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and the Acts of the Apostles

<sup>13</sup> e.g., 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans, Hebrews; the letters of Peter, James and others; letters to Timothy, Titus and others