

Second Sunday of Advent

6th December 2015

“What things soever were written, were written for our learning: that through patience and the comfort of the Scriptures, we might have hope.”

– *Romans 15:4.*



These words from today’s Epistle invite us during this time of Advent to look closely into the Scriptures. And so today I would simply like to say a few words about what we need to know about the Bible before we start reading. Catholic teaching about Sacred Scripture can be conveniently summarised by what we could call the Three I’s: inspiration, inerrancy and interpretation.

The first thing to know about the Bible is that it has been *inspired by God*. The Bible is absolutely unique in that it has God for its author. The word *Bible* comes from Greek and it literally means a library or collection of books; although the 72 books of Sacred Scripture were written over a long period of time by many different human authors – from Moses to St. John – the principal author is God himself. “All scripture, inspired of God, is profitable to teach, to reprove, to correct, to instruct in justice” (I Timothy 3:15). *Inspiration* literally means “breathed by God,” and so by means of divine inspiration God inclined the human authors to put into writing exactly what he wanted.

Inspiration is a special grace technically called a *charism*, which God gives to certain individuals not so much for their own personal good as for the good of the whole Church. By the gift of inspiration God acted in a special way on his chosen authors: he illuminated their minds so that they could correctly judge the revealed truths; he strengthened their wills so that they could do as he wished; and he assisted them in the act of writing so that they would put down exactly what God wanted – and only that. Inspiration applies to every single part of Scripture, not only to those passages which speak directly of holy things but to every detail. And yet inspiration differs from simple dictation. God is the principal author of Scripture and yet the human authors he chose – with their own unique gifts, characters, personal history and social context – also truly contributed to the final product. How can both God and the human author be fully responsible for Scripture? The answer is that the human writers were God’s *instruments*. When you go into a museum, you would never look at a painting and say, “look at this painting: this part was made by Raphael and this part was made by the paintbrush.” The artist and the brush both made the whole painting, but their activity – far from being in competition – is on two different levels. God, who knows all things, knew exactly what result would be achieved if he gave the grace of inspiration to this or that person, with their own special style, experiences and personality. You

could think of the carpenter using a lathe to make a spindle: he has a box full of bits that will create different shapes when applied to the spinning piece of wood: because he wants such and such an effect rather than another, he chooses one bit and not another. The carpenter is the brains behind the operation: he needs to choose the bit and turn the lathe. The bit on its own is incapable of shaping the wood, but it is hardly irrelevant, since no two shaped bits will give the same result. One instrument is chosen rather than another because the craftsman desires the result that *this* instrument will give rather than *that*. Likewise, God knows what a St. Paul would do with inspiration rather than, say, a St. Matthias or a St. Barnabas, and so for reasons that only God knows, he chooses to inspire one and not the other. Inspiration does not take away the freedom of the authors; but it does show the power and wisdom of God. That is why the Bible is at the same time the Word of God *and* the word of man: or better yet, it is the Word of God coming to us in the words of men.

The second thing to know about the Bible is called *inerrancy*, which means freedom from error. This is a direct consequence of inspiration: if God himself is the author of Scripture, how could Scripture contain anything false? As Pope Pius XII once put it: “as the substantial Word of God became like to men in all things, ‘except sin,’ so the words of God, expressed in human language, are made like to human speech in every respect, except error” (*Divino afflatus*, 37). Truth is simply the conformity of our mind with reality. God cannot possibly commit an error because he is Being itself; all reality comes from God, and so he is Truth itself. As Goodness itself, God does not lie. So when God speaks to us, we can be sure that he always tells the truth. Since all truth comes from God – not only the divine truths related to our salvation but also scientific truths relating to the world God has created – we know that there can never be any real contradictions between the Word of God and the *certain conclusions* of human history or physical science. *Apparent* difficulties arise, however, either when an individual Christian misunderstands a passage of Scripture or else when something that is merely a theory is presented as an absolute scientific fact. “As the heavens are exalted above the earth, so are ... my thoughts above your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:9). Our limited minds are not always able to understand exactly what God means to tell us, which shows us the great importance of humility when reading the Bible. Even the great St. Augustine had to admit, “in the Scriptures themselves the things which I do not know are many more than the things which I do know” (Letter 55, 21, *To Januarius*).

Inerrancy means that whatever is affirmed in the Scriptures is true *in the sense in which it is affirmed*: human language is a sort of envelope for the Word of

God. And just as we laugh sometimes when we see a small child on Christmas morning neglect the new toy in order to play with the wrapping paper, likewise the words used to express the message – the figures of speech, for example – should not be confused with the message itself. For example, when the psalm speaks of the might of God’s arm (*cf.* Psalm 135:12), what is being affirmed is not that God, who is a spirit (*cf.* St. John 4:24), has an arm, but simply that God is mighty, the arm being a human symbol with which we are familiar. Nonetheless even the human words of Scripture, inadequate as they are in some ways (for the finite can never exhaust the mystery of the infinite), we must always remember that these are the words which God himself has chosen.

This brings us to the very important third point: *interpretation*. To know what the Bible really teaches, we need to know how to interpret the written Word of God. As you know, this is the major difference between Catholics and Protestants. Catholics, members of the Church founded by Jesus, believe that the Word of God comes to us in these two sources of revelation, Scripture and Tradition, which are given to us by the Church. Protestants, on the other hand, believe that the only rule of faith for a believer is the Bible alone, and that each individual Christian can interpret this Word for himself. This Protestant theory, called *sola scripture*, or “Bible alone,” is of course illogical because, ironically, the Bible itself never mentions it. Already in the days of the Apostles, some Christians were being led astray by misinterpreting some of the more difficult Bible passages, and so St. Peter reminded them: “no prophecy of scripture is made by private interpretation” (II Peter 1:20).

The Bible must be interpreted *within the Church*: since it is the Church who gave us the Bible: it is to the Church that God has entrusted the Bible. At the simplest level this means that Catholics should *only* read translations of the Bible approved by the Church with explanatory notes by good Catholic scholars. We must interpret the Bible in keeping with the insights of the ancient Fathers of the Church, the echo of the Tradition which forms the larger context of Scripture. We must also respect what it called the “analogy of faith”: if we interpret a passage in a way that would contradict another passage of Scripture or one of the doctrines of our faith, then we are sure we have gotten something wrong. Without faith, no one can understand the Bible. Perhaps this explains why so much modern biblical scholarship is so completely barren: worse than the child who forgets about the toy because he is so distracted by the wrapping, these scholars spend their time shredding the wrapping! A final point is that we must respect the unity of Scripture: these 72 books have been inspired by God to give us a unified message. Jesus Christ is the key unlocking all of sacred history: we can never read the Old Testament without remembering that the promises have now been fulfilled. Quoting the

holy mediæval canon Hugh of St. Victor, Pope Benedict points out: “All divine Scripture is one book, and this one book is Christ, speaks of Christ and finds its fulfilment in Christ” (*De Arca Noe*, 2, 8, in *Verbum Domini*, 39).

And so when today’s Mass invites us to have hope through the patience and comfort that comes to us through the Scriptures, let us bear all this in mind. Advent is the season of hope: of expectation that turns into joy because we know God is faithful to his word. If you are still looking for some good spiritual exercises this Advent, it is not too late for you to start falling in love with the Word of God.