

Savour
the Bible

An excellent article by Fr Tim Redmond for Word of God Sunday last year - which we give out again this year because it explains our gift of a copy of St Luke's Gospel for your pocket!

The God Who Speaks

During Mass in a parish church in Rome in 2014 Pope Francis suggested that everyone should carry with them a small Bible or copy of the Gospels and should find a few minutes every day to read the word of God. It is an idea he has returned to many times. Then in 2019 he instituted a new annual celebration, the Sunday of the Word of God. It occurs on the 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, which is January 24th this year. It reflects the importance of the word of God in our lives.

Introducing the celebration, Francis recalls words at the end of Luke's Gospel. Just before the Ascension, speaking to his gathered disciples, Jesus 'opened their minds to understand the scriptures'. (Luke 24:45) This comes just after the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, where Jesus had earlier helped his friends to understand and respond in wonder 'were not our hearts burning within us as he talked to us on the road and opened the scriptures to us?' (Luke 24:32)

In the days after Jesus' death the disciples were at times confused, troubled and fearful. Hearing the word brought understanding and with it peace, consolation and courage, things which we all need. Even for those who had known him personally during his life on earth, reading and listening to the scriptures were important.

Today, nearly sixty years after the Second Vatican Council, some Catholics are still hesitant about reading the Bible. It can seem intimidating, which is rather sad. Over the coming months, I hope to be able to remove some of the mystique and encourage everyone to read the Bible for themselves, with confidence and enjoyment.

Let us begin with the word 'scripture'. When Jesus or his disciples use the word 'scripture' they are referring

to the collection of writings which we know as the Old Testament, the sacred writings of the Jewish people. At that time of course the New Testament had not been written! For us now, scripture, or holy scripture, or sacred scripture, refers to all the writings in the Bible, the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Again, quoting Pope Francis, 'the Bible cannot be just the heritage of some, much less a collection of books for the benefit of a privileged few. It belongs above all to those called to hear its message and to recognize themselves in its words.' That is all of us.

One of the most important figures in the spread of the knowledge of the Bible is St Jerome, someone whom Francis is obviously fond of and mentions often. Jerome is famous for his statement 'Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.' We have just celebrated the 1600th anniversary of his death. He was born in what is present day Croatia, converted to Christianity in Rome as an adult and travelled widely in Europe in the pursuit of his studies. Eventually he devoted himself to the study of the Bible, translating it from the original Greek and Hebrew texts into Latin, the everyday language of the Roman Empire. He wanted people to be able to hear and understand the word of God in their own language. And so he is a good patron for us.

The most important thing about reading the Bible is simply to do it! So, where to start? It is not a good idea to start with the first book, Genesis, and read through to the last, Revelation! It is better to start with familiar passages. Our Sunday gospels this year are mainly from Mark's Gospel and that is an excellent place to begin. It is short and it is simple and was the first gospel to be written, less than fifty years after the resurrection.

"These words contain a great teaching. The Bible cannot be just the heritage of some, much less a collection of books for the benefit of a privileged few. It belongs above all to those called to hear its message and to recognize themselves in its words... The Bible is the book of the Lord's people, who, in listening to it, move from dispersion and division towards unity. The word of God unites believers and makes them one people...."

May the Sunday of the Word of God help his people to grow in religious and intimate familiarity with the sacred Scriptures. For as the sacred author taught of old: "This word is very near to you: it is in your mouth and in your heart for your observance." (Deuteronomy 30:14)

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Given in Rome, at the Basilica of Saint John Lateran, on 30 September 2019, the liturgical Memorial of Saint Jerome, on the inauguration of the 1600th anniversary of his death.

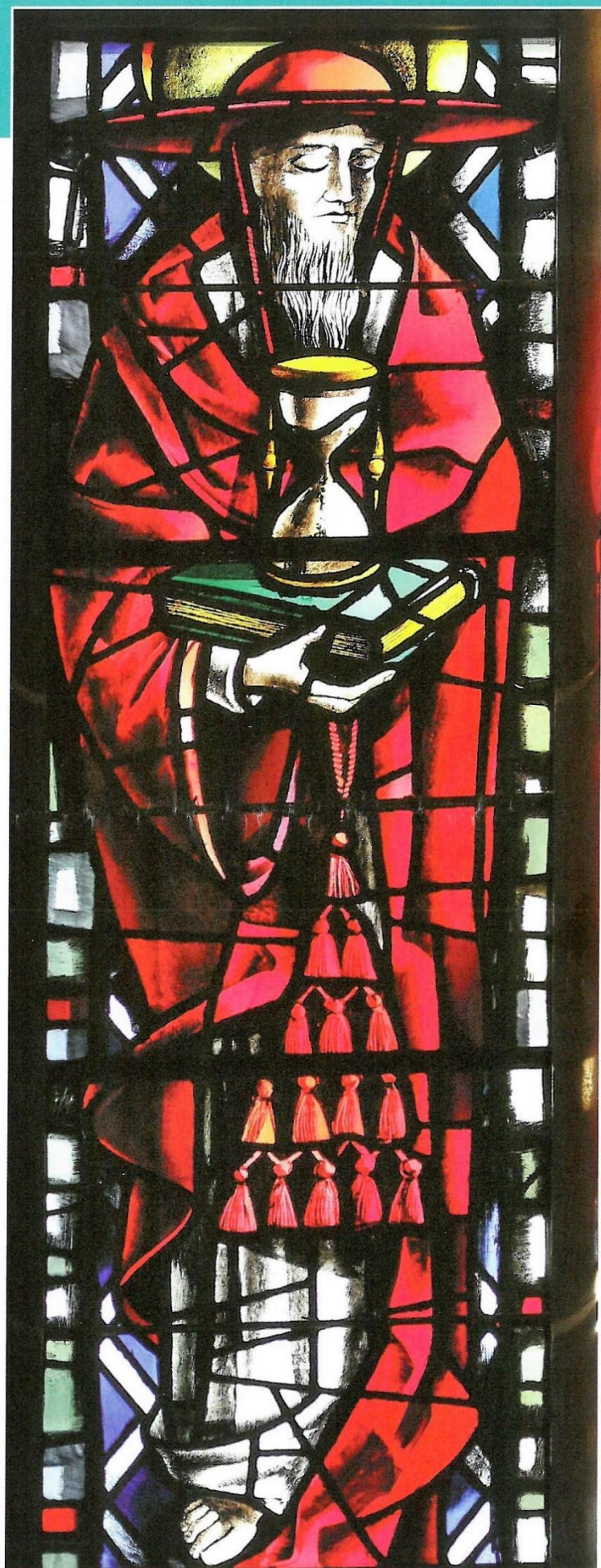
There are two ways of reading which complement each other. Begin by reading the Gospel straight through from beginning to end and follow the 'plot'. It is only about 35 pages long. Then, more reflectively, stop reading when something strikes you, something surprising or encouraging, or even something that makes you cross. Think about it, ask yourself why, pray about it.

Martin Buber, a famous Jewish scholar says 'read the Bible as though it were something entirely unfamiliar, as though it had not been set before you ready-made Face the book with a new attitude as something new.... Let whatever may happen occur between yourself and it. You do not know which of its sayings and images will overwhelm and mould you But hold yourself open.'

When this happens – and it will – stay with it. ■

Fr Tim Redmond is a former editor of *Africa Magazine*. He taught Scripture for many years in Kenya where he also served on the editorial team of *The African Bible*.

(Image by mnplatypus from Pixabay)



Stained glass window of St Jerome from St Dominic's church in San Francisco, USA. (Photo: L. Lew OP, Flickr)