

FR JOCK DALRYMPLE (SNR) - HOW TO APPROACH THE BIBLE

(Taken from the chapter 'Spiritual Reading' in his book, SIMPLE PRAYER)

The Bible is in a different category from any other Christian book, being the source of revelation which other books comment upon. The message of the Bible is, of course, relevant to every age, simply because God is relevant to every age; but the language and culture of the Bible is not.

The various books it contains each bring with them their own out of date culture, which has to be interpreted by each generation of Christians who read the Scriptures. The out-of-date-ness of the Bible makes for hard work by the scholars, but it also makes for a certain stability. One can turn to the Bible knowing that one is not subscribing to a passing theological or spiritual fashion. The Bible has a reassuring everlastingness which allows it to speak with equal effect to every age. It never gathers dust on the shelves or is relegated to history. It is, after all, the Word of God.

There are two ways of reading the Bible. The first is to approach it scientifically and examine it from the point of view of its human authors: who they were, what they intended to say, what was their background, what, therefore, are the hidden references which would mean much to their original audiences but have to be researched by us if we are to reveal anything. From this follows some theological reflection. For instance, in St Luke's account of the Transfiguration it is said that Jesus discussed with Moses and Elijah the 'Exodus' he was to accomplish in Jerusalem.

This is a reference which will mean a lot to the reader who knows the significance of the Exodus in Jewish faith and in Christian theology. Without such rudimentary scriptural knowledge, however, the reference will be lost, and a richer meaning of the Transfiguration will remain undetected by the reader. One will have missed a fruitful reflection on the event of the Transfiguration which was in the author's mind when he wrote it down. This is one of many examples of how an understanding of the Old Testament greatly enriches our reading of the New.

I am not suggesting that every Christian needs to be a scholar, but I think that all of us should be aware of the findings of the scholars about each book of the Bible.

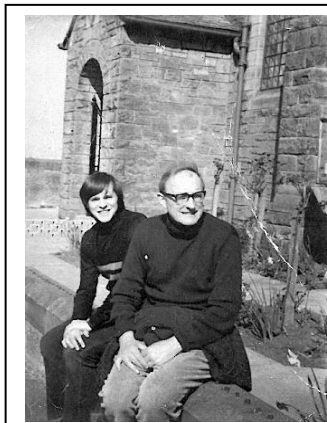
Nowadays this background knowledge is readily available in the introductions and footnotes to our Bibles. To neglect to become acquainted with these is to close the door on many riches lying within the Old and New Testaments. If, on the other hand, we take reading our Bibles seriously enough to absorb this background knowledge of God's revelation, our prayer lives will be greatly helped. A healthy feature of the post-Vatican II Church is the growth of Bible study groups and circles in ordinary parish life. These are excellent aids to prayer for the participants.

Knowing the scientific background to the books of the Bible is, however, only a preliminary to prayer. Prayer begins when we start to read our Bible listening primarily no longer to the historical human authors, but to God, the supreme Author. Prayer begins when we listen to what God is saying to us at the present moment through our reading of a passage. *'One must read the Bible as a young man reads a letter from his beloved. It is written for me,'* declared the Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855).

When this happens, our scientific knowledge of the passage recedes into the background and gives way to a direct, prayerful listening to the message from God. We are listening directly to God through the inspired page before us.

The critical ear has given way to the receptive ear. We slowly read, ponder, and pray the passage, in no hurry to finish it, ready to pause and listen for a long time, should we feel inclined not to move on. Of course, the preliminary reading has been useful in its time, but now it is left behind as we give full rein to our desire to be with God, listening to his will for us, not critically but in obedience.

The essence of this sort of reading is to read slowly and openly. We have to read slowly, because quick reading detects only the surface meaning of any passage; deeper meanings take time to surface in our minds. When I get a letter from someone who means much to me, I open and read it eagerly, but then I do not throw it away. I keep it, and later in the day will read it again. I repeat this lovingly for days on end. Each time I read the letter, I see more meaning in it, because I have been analysing it for hidden information: Why did she say that? Why did she not



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answer that question I put to her? Why did she end in that way? The more I read the letter, the more I see in it. It becomes less a question of reading and more a question of meditative pondering, even a loving communion with the absent correspondent. This loving process is what the monastic tradition calls '*lectio divina*.' It is both slow, as described above, and open, because one reads not for the sake of taking information into oneself but in order to go outward to one's absent friend in silent communion. The spiritual writer, Friedrich Von Hügel (1852-1925), likened this meditative spiritual reading to '*dissolving a lozenge on the tongue*.'

All spiritual books need to be read in this way, but especially the Bible, which is God's Word.

I conclude this reflection on spiritual reading with a description which comes in a book by W.W.E. Orchard, *From Faith to Faith*. He describes his old grandfather, a simple labouring man, a nonconformist in the English tradition.

'When he came home from work, after his meal, he shaved, dressed himself more carefully, and then settled down to the Bible, set under the lamp on the table before him. When the Book had been opened at the proper place, his spectacles had to be carefully polished, to the accompaniment of anticipatory sighs over the treasures he was about to explore. The spectacles being then as carefully adjusted, a verse was slowly read, half aloud to himself. Deeper sighs then followed, perhaps accompanied by the exclamation, 'This Blessed Book!' Further reflections would bring forth joyful tears, which meant that the spectacles had to be wiped again; and so on, but always with the same deliberation. A visiting minister used to tell how, coming in upon him one evening during these pious exercises (for he was slightly deaf, which made it possible for him sometimes to be observed unknown) he enquired what was giving him such evident joy, and was told that it was the 8th of Romans: 'I have been on it all the week,' he explained.

'And how far have you got?'

'The 5th verse' was the reply; and this was Thursday night!'

This is spiritual reading of the deepest kind, reading which has passed from meditation to contemplation under the influence of the inspired Word of God.