

## **Receptive Ecumenism International Conference**

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### **‘Scripture and Receptive Ecumenism: Where Are We Now?’**

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#### **Introduction**

I am delighted to have this chance to reflect with you this morning on a key subject within the whole agenda of Receptive Ecumenism. What I shall say grows directly out of a delight I experienced three months ago, when I had the privilege of being the Anglican Fraternal Delegate at the Synod of Bishops in Rome, enjoying the hospitality of that great city, particularly that of Cardinal Walter Kasper and his staff, sitting in on all the main sessions as well as belonging to a small group, and sharing the excitement of a very creative time in which the ecumenical possibility, though not the central topic, was never far from the surface. Perhaps I should say that the results of the Synod are at the moment in the form of ‘propositions’ that were voted on, and which now go to Pope Benedict for him to write up the final document.

What then was the central topic? Someone was asked that at dinner last night, and the answer was given, ‘Scripture’. And so you might have thought. But actually the topic was ‘The Word of God’, and one of the questions that was never fully resolved was how exactly what we might mean by ‘The Word of God’ relates to scripture. Scripture is central, certainly; but there was no consensus on the relation of scripture to the larger category of ‘God’s Word’, or on the interrelationship between scripture and the other elements of ‘God’s Word’, not least tradition. I shall come back to this.

In this short presentation I shall sketch three areas for reflection: first, some reflections on the key concerns of the Synod; second, one particular area of concern, namely the relation of scripture to historical criticism; then, third, I want to reflect on a topic that kept trying to come to the surface but never really made it, namely scripture and the church’s task, i.e. mission. I hope that these reflections will thus actually embody the whole principle of ‘receptive ecumenism’, as I reflect from an Anglican standpoint on the gifts that Rome is now offering me, and as I try to offer some possible complementary gifts in return . . .

## 1. The Synod and the Word

In terms of the development of modern Roman Catholic thinking, the Synod clearly had the function of inhabiting more fully the document *Dei Verbum* from Vatican II, with strong support from the 1993 report of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. It was clear that the kind of thinking represented there takes time to work its way into the whole bloodstream of the church worldwide, and this is at last happening. Many bishops at the Synod spoke excitedly of the effect of Bible reading and study on their congregations, and of the sea-change that this represents compared with the time, not long ago, when the Bible was quite literally a closed book to ordinary lay people. More than once I heard bishops declare that the thing about the Bible is that when you read it it can bring you into a living personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and I had the sense that this was, as it were, a new discovery for many. In particular, the Synod was emphatic that the work of translating the Bible into all the vernacular languages in the world must proceed as fast as possible, training a new generation of Bible translators. Moreover, the Synod said, in effect, that every man, woman and child among the faithful should own their own Bible in their own language and be encouraged to read and study it for themselves. In my small group somebody raised the objection that this is unrealistic for many poor people, and the Synod fathers insisted that this is what we must aim at, even if it takes time to achieve. At this point, as you may well imagine, I sat there thinking that if only someone had said all this in, say, 1525, the entire history of the church, and with it of the western world at least, would have been totally different. To look no further than this country, and to one of my lifelong heroes: *this was all that William Tyndale was asking for*: the Bible in the vernacular, with every person encouraged to read it for themselves. Grant that, and trust the Holy Spirit to work through the Word for whatever reformations might be needed.

Already, therefore, the Synod's ecumenical dimension was clearly implicit. One of the most striking things I heard said, early on in the three-week meeting, was that there are two signs and means of unity which we already possess, namely baptism and the Bible. I found that greatly encouraging, but it precipitates an anxious reflection: granted that we do indeed share the Bible (give or take a few apocryphal books here and there), isn't it odd that when churches claim to base themselves on the Bible and nothing but the Bible they tend to fragment? If the Bible really were a means of unity as well as a sign, should that really be the case? Perhaps it is this that drove many of the Synod Fathers to insist that the phrase

‘The Word of God’ refers not to the Bible alone, but to the Bible and what is referred to as ‘the living tradition of the church’, and even also to the Magisterium.

But before I get to that, a further ecumenical comment. Many people today in the Anglican tradition as well as the Roman Catholic encounter scripture primarily through the lectionary, not least at the eucharist. It is in my view a great gain that we now substantially share that lectionary, and with several other denominations as well, and the point was well taken at the Synod that if there are to be revisions in the lectionary, as many of the Fathers wanted, these should be made in consultation with ecumenical partners. But that is just the surface point: underneath, of course, is that fact that if you only meet the Bible in the lectionary you are shut up to whatever the lectionary-makers had in mind, rather than allowing the primal text to make its primal impact on you – something so difficult and important that there are of course many different ways of avoiding it, not only lectionaries. (I did have the sense at one point that some of the Synod were showing signs of nervousness about the Bible, like zoo-keepers reminding one another of how dangerous the tiger was, how necessary to keep the cage tightly shut. But supposing Christ is the tiger?)

In particular, there was constant stress on the possibility, and the delight, of *lectio divina*. Several of the Fathers spelt out in detail both what they meant by this, the pattern of Bible reading in which the individual or group takes time to read and ponder and pray over a passage of scripture, allowing the presence and power of God himself to penetrate their mind and imagination, and also the transformative effect that regular *lectio divina* can and does have on individuals and groups. Again, as you might suppose, I found myself thinking, If only all this had been said four hundred years ago. And another, ironic reflection: I wish it could be said that we Anglicans had maintained this tradition of personal Bible reading, which was part of our Reformation birthright. Looking at some parts of the church, one might be forgiven for musing that the Catholics seem to be rediscovering the Bible just at the point where some of the Protestants are finally abandoning it. That, of course, would considerably overstate things, but it shows that the ecumenical possibility which was so clearly present throughout is not, alas, a foregone conclusion. Nor, in terms of ‘receptive ecumenism’, is it necessarily the case that God has given a love of scripture to one church which others can then receive from it. Things are much more complicated than that, and a multiple and many-layered giving and receiving of scriptural gifts seems to me more likely to be the appropriate model.

But back to *lectio divina*: I was delighted when I discovered that the ‘scriptural reasoning’ project was going to be enfolded within this conference, and indeed within this morning’s session. I have had the privilege of taking part in this project,

not as often as I would like but enough to understand what is going on; and I have to say that if Christians, Jews and Muslims can sit down together around their sacred texts, then *a fortiori* different families of Christians should be able to do the same, only more so. The methods may be slightly different – no doubt we shall hear more about that in a moment – but the point is the same, of engaging with one another through shared contemplation of scripture. And here, I think, we discover one of the many points where our sometimes high-flown and abstract discussions come right down to earth, to the level of the ordinary parish or neighbourhood. What is to stop Christians from every tradition coming together in each locality to read the Bible together? Absolutely nothing except their nervousness either before one another or before the text. One of my hopes from the Synod of Bishops will be that a decree will go out from Caesar Augustus – I beg your pardon, I mean of course from Pope Benedict – that all the world should be enrolled into this project, and that Christian neighbours should be invited to join in wherever possible. And if individual dioceses were to give such a lead as well we could be on the verge of something quite wonderful.

Or possibly, something very puzzling and difficult. What will happen when Christians discover that they differ not only on what they think the text is saying but on the framework within which they read it? Back to the discussion of scripture and tradition. When some of the Synod Fathers insisted that ‘The Word of God’ refers not to scripture alone, but to scripture and the Church’s living tradition (is that, I wondered, in implicit contrast with certain *dead* traditions, or does ‘living’ here mean ‘ongoing’ and ‘open-ended’?), with some even adding ‘the magisterium’, any protestant listening in would think ‘ah, well, they’ve just taken away with the left hand what they gave with the right’. But the relationship of scripture and tradition remains in my view a creative as well as urgent area to discuss. It correlates closely at various levels with the whole debate about nature and grace which remains, I believe, the central topic where Roman Catholics differ from both Anglicans and the more overtly protestant churches. The theological tendency to suppose that whatever is, is good and God-given, even if it needs a bit of help here and there, spills over into attitudes to tradition itself, and thereby quite clearly into theological method: one of the things an Anglican observer is bound to notice in Rome, and indeed in this sequence of conferences, is the way in which the multiple pronouncements not only of Popes but of Synods and Councils become in themselves the primary sources, so that in order to say anything new one has to work one’s way through what seems to the outsider a labyrinth of documentation – the epistemological equivalent, to a non-Roman eye, of the spiritual or even ontological problem of having to work one’s way through a host of lesser saints and angels before one is allowed near to the throne of Jesus Christ himself. I cannot explore this further here, but I just note it as a question which

should at least be named, lest it get in the way of our mutual exploration. Protestants have, of course, invented their own equivalent superstructures, not least the labyrinthine historical scholarship which frightens many away from the text; but I shall return to that presently.

A further problem now presents itself. Many of the Fathers were anxious about ‘sects’; but often it is these ‘sects’, so-called, which are in fact trying to immerse themselves in scripture. We should not allow our anxiety about ecclesial competition to put us off the very activity which might turn that competition into a happy collaboration . . .

How, then, do we approach the puzzle of scripture and tradition? It is significant, I think, and perhaps not sufficiently remarked upon, that even those with the highest view of tradition and the magisterium will still only read scripture itself as part of the liturgy. Granted the very high value put on liturgy, this is enormously important: we do not find paragraphs from encyclicals, or from conciliar documents, substituted for the Old Testament or the Epistle during worship. They may, of course, inform or be quoted in the homily, but that is another matter, and the relationship of the homily or sermon to the liturgy and the reading of scripture is another area for further exploration. I was again delighted to hear the strong insistence that every time the Mass is celebrated *coram populo* there should be a homily, even if only a brief one, on the readings for the day. This will worry many priests, I think, as it would in my tradition (despite Cranmer’s insistence on the same point), but it is of more than mere *pragmatic* interest; something is being said about the importance of *receiving* scripture on the part of both priest and people. And the people doing the receiving are people who are formed by and within particular traditions, whether they realise it or not. At least, I reflected sitting there in Rome, the Romans are quite well aware that there is this thing called ‘living tradition’, whereas when I find myself in debates with other Protestants I often meet a naive positivism: other people come with presuppositions, we are just reading the text. That, of course, is the very point when such traditions can be at their most powerful.

There is much more to say about this, but not here. I want to hurry on more briefly to the second urgent topic.

## **2. Scripture, the Church, and ‘Historical Criticism’**

One of the recurring themes of the Synod was the problem, but also the necessity, of ‘historical criticism’. Many Synod fathers have clearly had bad experiences of historical criticism, either because such work appears to undermine the basis of the faith or because, while the scholarship may be faith-affirming, the footnotes on

each page have risen like a tidal wave and threaten to engulf the main text, metaphorically or even literally. Scholars all too often write in an impenetrable style which repels the ordinary worshipper. I suspect we all know the problem, and I fully understand many bishops, seeing clergy drown under this tidal wave, saying we must keep historical scholarship at arm's length and just get people to read the text devotionally without asking difficult questions. At this point I did start to think that there were many gifts which other parts of the church have been given which could be offered to our Roman friends, gifts of finding the way through, of navigating the difficult passages of historical scholarship and emerging none the less with a real encounter with the text and with the Lord who speaks through it.

But, equally, there were gifts coming the other way. Pope Benedict himself took the microphone at one significant point, on Tuesday October 14, and stressed that since the Word was made flesh we were people whose faith was grounded not in a mythology but in things that actually happened in history. Doing historical scholarship is not then an optional extra, but a vital part of the faith itself. At the same time, the Pope stressed that a proper belief in the Spirit means that the Bible can never be left as merely a book about the past, resulting in a secularized or positivistic hermeneutic. The Spirit who inspired scripture is with us as we read, he insisted, so that we must constantly overcome any dualism between exegesis and theology, which reflect two dimensions of a single reality. This, as you may imagine, was music to my ears and that of many others, but it raises further questions, as does the Pope's own very interesting book on Jesus. What is historical criticism, how does it relate to canonical criticism, and how can either be fashioned both to do justice to the text and to serve the needs of the church?

Historical criticism itself, clearly, is not one single thing. What the Pope means by that historical criticism which remains a non-negotiable imperative is obviously not the same thing that would be meant by, say, the Jesus Seminar. There is of course a current debate – I was going to say a war, but let's keep it cool for the moment – within protestant and post-protestant scholarship about what constitutes genuine historical study of the Bible, often conducted frustratingly within the parameters of the old modernist divide between objectivity and subjectivity. Devout Christians are often told that if their scholarship leads them back to a stronger affirmation of the central Christian tenets, this shows that they're not being 'objective', whereas of course if an atheist declares that history shows Jesus never existed, or never said and did what Christians claim, such a scholar is being truly 'objective'. I hope we all now recognise that for the oversimplification it is; but I'm not sure that many scholars, still less many practitioners in the parishes, have really tumbled to the fact that there are several significantly different activities currently sailing under the flag of 'history'. It would take too long today to set these out, but suffice it to say that what is called 'historical criticism' is often

in fact the relentless imposition on to the Bible of a rigid and essentially Deistic framework of Enlightenment thought. Part of the trouble here, I think, is that some at least of the Roman Catholic biblical scholars who responded to the call of Vatican II and gave themselves wholeheartedly to the enterprise were not sufficiently aware of the philosophical and epistemological minefields they were getting themselves into, where in some cases they joined their protestant colleagues in the attempt to produce ‘neutral’ or objective ‘results’, often with conclusions which, were I one of the Bishops in the Synod, I would hope my clergy would avoid. But this doesn’t mean there isn’t such a thing as a genuine historical criticism which avoids the traps of the Enlightenment and the equal and opposite traps of the postmodern critique. I have in mind, as a model, a Catholic scholar who has been a great gift to me as to many: the late great Ben F. Meyer, who taught in McMaster University in Canada and whose book *The Aims of Jesus*, published thirty-one years ago, continues to tower over most others as a statement of method, even though one may disagree with some of his results.

One particular gift which remains ambiguous is that of ‘canonical criticism’. Pope Benedict refers to this as though it were a quite new thing, which is I think somewhat misleading. Certainly it is risky to appeal to the larger canonical context to solve the problems of particular texts. Again, part of the problem is that the way biblical studies has often been taught appeals to people who prefer detailed study to big-picture work (those who score ‘S’ rather than ‘N’ on the Myers-Briggs scale), and it is perhaps overdue that the ‘N’s should strike back. But the details always matter in history, and I’m not sure that we have done more yet than state the problem of the canon versus the detail. All this needs far more exploration than I have time for today.

One particular problem which the Synod identified again and again was that of how to read the Old Testament. It is clear that this has been a great worry to many who are on the one hand eager that their flock should read the Bible but anxious as to what they will make of the Hebrew Scriptures. Good work has been done on this but I do believe that there are many gifts waiting in other parts of the church to be received by Rome at this point. Part of the difficulty is discernment: how does the busy parish priest know which commentaries and guidebooks will actually offer helpful wisdom? There is no short cut here, but I believe the ecumenical context can and should bring great mutual benefit.

### **3. Scripture and the Church’s Task**

But I hurry on to my third and final section, ‘scripture and the church’s task’. Here I believe there are gifts aplenty in the rest of the church which we need to be

offering to our Catholic friends. One of the frustrations of the Synod, for me, was that there was almost no attention given to mission, to the task of the church in the world, though you might have thought that even a cursory reading of scripture would have pushed that to the fore. Nor, within that, was there any engagement with the political task and opportunity of the church, though again you might have thought that this would emerge both from scripture itself and from the work not least of leading Catholics in the field of liberation theology. Why was that missing?

There is a great irony here. At the risk again of oversimplification, it did seem sometimes as though the Synod was oscillating between the twin poles of a devotional or spiritual reading of scripture and a historical or critical reading of scripture, and trying to find the right balance or amalgam of the two. But both of these can be, and often have been, ways in which the social, cultural, and not least political meanings of scripture have been avoided. In fact, one might see the devotional and the historical/critical readings of scripture as twin ways in which the church has accommodated to the Enlightenment imperative, to keep God out of public life so that we can get on with running the world ourselves.

My own way of addressing this was twofold. On the one hand, I advocated a hermeneutic of heart, mind, soul and strength: the devotional, the academic, the rehumanising and not least the missional readings of scripture. We need them all, I believe, and in a proper balance, for a fully Christian use of the Bible, a fully Christian ‘hearing’ of God’s word in all its fullness. On the other hand, I appealed, somewhat cheekily I guess, to the Mother of the Lord herself as the model. Building on the powerful words of Cardinal Dias at this summer’s Lambeth Conference, I suggested a fourfold Marian typology: *fiat*, *magnificat*, *conferabat* and *stabat*. The mind affirms God’s sovereign call; the soul celebrates God’s overthrow of the powers; the heart ponders and mulls over all these things; and the strength stays patiently with the task, even where it is beyond understanding, until God’s work is done. I was struck by the fact that, though many Synod Fathers referred to Mary in one way or another, none of them (I think) drew out what is perhaps the most obvious thing of all: that the Magnificat is a wonderful statement of celebratory political theology, waiting to be unpacked in a world where the absence of the church from serious political engagement has been, we may suppose, one of the many contributory causes of our current chaos in both our democratic and our financial institutions.

And here I make my final suggestion for our work together, not least our shared reading of scripture. We must allow the historical questions to be raised, and to be either answered or at least parked where we can still see them. We must allow the text to warm our hearts in ways we might not have imagined. We must encourage one another, as we read scripture together, to find our human lives enriched, our

imaginations stretched, our memories revived and our determination increased to live as more truly human beings, as a more truly human family. But we must also ask ourselves: if this is indeed God's word, what might it say not only *to* us but *through* us? What might it mean for our day to recapture the meaning of Ephesians 3, where Paul says that it is precisely in the unity of the church, across traditional barriers, that the manifold wisdom of God is made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places? If we only approach receptive ecumenism in the sense of giving one another Christmas presents, we may not get very far. We have to see the task in terms of Good Friday presents, Easter presents and Pentecost presents, enabling us so to inhabit together the mystery of Christ that we may together, in the power of the Spirit and directed by scripture, go out side by side to proclaim to the world that Jesus Christ is Lord.