

THE BIBLE IN WORSHIP¹

ILLTUD EVANS, O.P.

WHEN we say that the Bible is the word of God we mean first of all that God is its author. That is to say God inspired human writers to compose the books which we call the Sacred Scriptures. But he did not dictate them: the human authors were not mere secretaries who had no words of their own to utter. But they *were* inspired, and inspired by the Holy Spirit who is the Truth itself. God used these men as his instruments: he respected, as it were, their own gifts and skill, their mental outlook and their individuality of style and diction. But he preserved them from error, for they were to write of God's own work—and in that there can be no lie. If God exists, then God can neither deceive nor be deceived: he is not merely truthful, he is the Truth, and so the words that are his are true.

The Bible, as the record of God's work, is a revealing, a making known of the hidden things of God which man could never know for himself. It is a revealing first made to a chosen people, the Jews, and then to all the world through the Son of God, Jesus Christ our Lord. It is not the only source of that revelation, for the written word can plainly never be complete: in any case it necessarily follows the events it records. As St John tells us, at the end of his gospel: 'There is much else besides that Jesus did: if all of it were put in writing, I do not think the world itself would contain the books which would have to be written' (John 21, 25).

For the events which the Bible recalls are not simply events of history. They happened, certainly, and all our understanding of the Bible depends on the literal meaning of what we read. These events happened and are true. But they happen still, in the sense that the work of God continues still and so the word of God is spoken still. As St Paul explains, 'Everything in the Scripture has been divinely inspired, and has its uses; to instruct us, to expose our errors, to correct our faults, to educate us in holy

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living' (II Tim. 3, 16). If then we want to understand the Bible, we shall want to see what *use* Christians have made of it from the beginning: we shall want to discover how this sense of the Bible's actuality here and now has been realized in the life of the Church. For the Church exists to go on making the work of God present to men: so, too, to make the word of God heard among men. The Church has always said in effect: 'This is what God did, this is what he said: and this is what he goes on doing and goes on saying. His word is still spoken.'

And God's final word to man is the sending of his Son into the world to restore all men to God's friendship, a friendship lost through sin. The Word is made flesh. And this we find wonderfully summed up in the Epistle to the Hebrews: 'In old days, God spoke to our fathers in many ways and by many means, through the prophets; now at last in these times he has spoken to us with a Son to speak for him; a Son, whom he has appointed to inherit all things, just as it was through him that he created this world of time; a Son, who is the radiance of his Father's splendour, and the full expression of his being; all creation depends, for its support, on his enabling word.' (Heb. 1, 1-3).

We can see, then, the whole of the Bible as a commentary on this fact of incarnation. The word of God is in the end to be the Word made flesh. All the Old Testament is a preparation for it: the New Testament is the declaring of it. The coming of Christ our Lord is the central point of the Bible as it is the central point of human history, from which even the unbeliever must number his years. In the Old Testament God reveals himself to a particular people: he makes a covenant for them. They are to worship him for his goodness and mercy towards them, and much of the Old Testament (and especially the Psalms) is taken up with his people's acknowledgement of what he truly is: 'You are my people and I am your God'. And God's promise is that in the fulness of time a Saviour shall be born: all the marks of God's mercy towards the Jews look to this final work of his. So the New Testament is the account of how that came to pass and what its meaning must be now to those who believe: a new life in Christ, who became man that all men, and no longer a chosen people, might return to God.

Worship, then, is the expression of this theme of God's goodness, for goodness once acknowledged evokes praise and

thanksgiving. 'Give thanks to the Lord', the Psalmist cries again and again. 'His mercy endures for ever; echo the cry, all you who worship the Lord.' It was natural, therefore, that the Jews should use their sacred writings as an essential part of their public worship. They were so conscious of the providential meaning of their history, of God's interventions on their behalf, that they could not cease to praise him: 'Not to us, Lord, not to us the glory; let thy name alone be honoured; thine the merciful; thine the faithful'. But all looked to its fulfilment in Christ: the earlier mercies were to be infinitely transcended by the coming of the promised Redeemer, so long foretold.

When he came, himself born among the chosen people, he took his place in the worship that was publicly offered to his Father. And in St Luke's gospel we read of an incident which sums up the unity of the word, the work and the worship—for they are met in him who speaks, in Christ who is the Eternal Word of the Father. 'Then he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went into the synagogue there, as his custom was, on the sabbath day, and stood up to read. The book given to him was the book of the prophet Isaias; so he opened it, and found the place where the words ran: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; he has anointed me, and sent me to preach the gospel to the poor, to restore the broken-hearted; to bid the prisoners go free, and the blind have sight; to set the oppressed at liberty, to proclaim a year when men may find acceptance with the Lord, a day of retribution. Then he shut the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. All those who were in the synagogue fixed their eyes on him, and thus he began speaking to them, This Scripture which I have read in your hearing is today fulfilled.' (Luke 4, 16-21.) Here we penetrate to the very heart of the Bible's meaning: the word is fulfilled in the coming of the Word made flesh, and it is the Son of God's uttering of the word of God which gives its meaning now to all men's worship. So it is that throughout the world the thousands of priests and members of religious orders who recite daily the Divine Office, the public prayer of the Church which is almost entirely made up of readings and chants from the Bible, say this prayer: 'Lord, in union with that divine intention with which on earth thou didst praise God, I offer these prayers to thee'. All our Lord's life on earth was an act of worship of his Father, and that act of

worship he commits now to his Church, which goes on giving praise to God: he the Head and we the members, forever offering that sacrifice of praise which Christ offered once and for all upon the Cross.

In the assemblies of the early Christians, the Bible was, as we should expect, an essential part of their worship. But it was no longer to be simply a recalling of former mercies, as it was for the Jews. For the Christians, the presence of Christ was the very centre of their worship. 'I am with you always', he had promised, and that was realized most profoundly in the gathering of those who were recalling the redeeming work of Christ not simply as an event of the past, but as a present reality. Thus Justin, in his *Apology*, written not later than the year 150, gives us a vivid picture of Christian worship in the earliest days of the Church and of the place of the Bible in it—a picture that remains substantially true of the worship we know today. 'And on the day which is called the day of the sun', he writes, 'there is an assembly of all who live in the towns or in the country; and the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits. Then the reader ceases, and the president speaks, admonishing us and exhorting us to imitate these excellent examples. Then we arise together and offer prayers; and, as we said before, when we have concluded our prayer, bread is brought, and wine and water, and the president in like manner offers up prayers and thanksgiving with all his might; and the people assent with *Amen*; and there is the distribution and partaking by all of the Eucharist.'

Here, from the very beginning, we see the use of the Bible in worship not merely as a means of personal prayer—though of course it can and must be that. The sacred Scriptures are seen to belong above all to the prayer of the Christian community in its coming together to represent the sacrifice of Christ our Lord. The Liturgy, then, (and the Greek word originally means a work, something that is *done*), is the public worship which our Redeemer Christ gives as Head of the Church to his Father: it is the continuation of the work that was his to do on earth. As it is expressed in the Epistle to the Hebrews in which Christ is made to use the words of the Psalms, 'See, then, I said, I am coming to fulfil what is written of me, where the book lies unrolled; I do thy Will, O my God'. And that worship now is

rendered by the faithful to their Head and by him to the Eternal Father: it is, in a word, the total worship of the Mystical Body of Christ, of the Head and all the members.

The Bible is the means—and especially the Gospels are the means—by which God's word is made available to us here and now: we are, when we hear it, so to say, contemporary with Christ. That is one important reason why the Bible should never be made to appear something merely venerable and its words just incantations. New translations—such as that of Mgr Ronald Knox which I have used in this talk—can do much to quicken our understanding, for these words, as our Lord himself said, are the words of life—and they can be lost if they are hidden in a mist of ancient associations. And the fact that the Bible can still command so deep a response in men's hearts, can correspond so exactly to their profoundest needs, is proof of its true meaning. When we read it, when we use it in worship, we are once more hearing the word of God. 'Let us listen to the Gospel', says St Augustine, 'as though the Lord himself were speaking to us. And let us not say, How happy were those who saw him, for many who saw him in fact were those who put him to death; the precious words that came from his mouth are written for us, are preserved for us, are said aloud for us, and will remain for all those who come after us. The Lord is on high, but the Lord is none the less with us here in his truth. His resurrected body is no longer with us; but his truth is everywhere present. Let us listen to the Lord.' (*In Joann.* 1.)

We can turn now to a single example of the way the Bible comes to life in its liturgical use, when worship gives to the word all its deepest meaning. The sufferings and resurrection of Christ our Lord are called to mind each year in Holy Week. Each day we identify ourselves with that sequence of events, from the triumphant entry into Jerusalem, the condemnation under Pilate, the way to Calvary, the crucifixion, to the resurrection from the tomb in the night of Easter. And these events took place during the solemn celebration of the Passover, when the Jews gathered in Jerusalem to commemorate the mercy of God in sparing his people, when, as we read in the book of Exodus, 'the Lord passed by the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, smiting only the Egyptians' (Exodus 12, 27). The feast, with its sacrifice of the paschal lamb, was to celebrate God's mercy to his chosen

people, in bringing them out of slavery into the promised land. And it is at this moment that Christ is sacrificed: it is indeed while gathered with his disciples in the Upper Room to celebrate the Passover that he institutes the Eucharist: 'do this for a commemoration of me'. His death is to be the new Passover: no longer for a particular people from a slavery that is one of time and place, but for the whole of mankind, who through Christ pass over from the slavery of sin to the promised land of grace—the new life that Christ our Lord inaugurates through his death and his resurrection from the dead.

The Liturgy of Holy Week, the worship that the Church offers to God on these solemn days, is saturated with this sense of the biblical word that comes to life in Christ and now is made present as long as time lasts in the worship of the Church. 'Has not Christ been sacrificed for us, our paschal victim?', St Paul asks. All finds its fulfilment in Christ. The word is true, and now its fulness of meaning appears. The work of God is declared. And this is done in the worship that the people of God offer to the Father, with the word of God on their lips—their prayer no longer simply their own, but the very prayer of Christ the Lord who leads all men back to the Father.



WATER AND THE SPIRIT¹

ALEXANDER JONES

DROUGHT and flood, too little and too much, are alike man's bane. Water is at once a blessing and a curse. In the biblical tradition it has been chosen for a villainous role: from the primeval abyss through to the Deluge, from the threat of the Red Sea to the menace of Assyria's overflowing river, from the flood that would overwhelm the Psalmist to the great waters that were the throne of persecuting Rome, this one element of the four has played its malicious part. Of its nature unruly, it symbolizes the chaos which would, if it could, defy the check and order of God. But it can be harnessed. The controlling spirit of God dominates the first abyss, his hand shuts the

¹ Remarks evoked by the recent appearance, eagerly awaited, of the one-volume 'La Sainte Bible, traduite en français sous la direction de l'École Biblique de Jérusalem', Paris Cerf, 1956. It is popularly known as 'The Jerusalem Bible'. Our quotations are translated from this text.