

MAKING GOOD SENSE OF THE SCRIPTURES



UNPACKING THE EMMAUS SERIES

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THE EMMAUS SERIES



Questions Catholics ask on their journey of Faith

MAKING GOOD SENSE OF THE SCRIPTURES

SESSION 1

Introductory readings

Two readings from the New Testament concerning the place of the Scriptures in the life of the Church.

Reading 1

Second Letter of Paul to Timothy (3:14-17)

You must keep to what you have been taught and know to be true; remember who your teachers were, and how, ever since you were a child, you have known the holy scriptures – from these you can learn the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. All scripture is inspired by God and useful for refuting error, for guiding people's lives and teaching them to be holy. This is how a man who is dedicated to God becomes fully equipped and ready for any good work.

Reading 2

Second Letter of Peter (1:16, 19-21)

When we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, we were not slavishly repeating cleverly invented myths ... So we have confirmation of the words of the prophets, and you will be right to pay attention to it as to a lamp for lighting a way through the dark, until the dawn comes and the morning star rises in your minds. At the same time, we must recognise that the interpretation of scriptural prophecy is never a matter for the individual. For no prophecy ever came from human initiative. When people spoke for God it was the Holy Spirit that moved them. □

Questions opening up the topic

Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp.14-15 – sharing reactions to the following questions:

Questions

- ◆ In recent times, we Catholics have had a greatly increased exposure to the full range of the Scriptures – especially through the liturgical readings. Listeners can often be puzzled by what they hear. What questions do you have about the Scriptures?

- ◆ Can you recall moments of encouragement and inspiration you have had, as you became more familiar with the message of the Scriptures?

Viewing of DVD

- ◆ Chapter 1:
The Bible: The Literature of God's People
- ◆ Chapter 2:
The Challenge of Modern Scholarship
- ◆ Chapter 3:
The Old Testament

Sharing of reactions to the presentation

Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp. 14-15.

Question

- ◆ What has struck you as enlightening, inspiring, or even puzzling?

A reading related to the theme

The Constitution on Divine Revelation of Vatican II (nn. 11-12)

In composing the sacred books, God chose individuals and, while employed by God, they made use of their power and abilities. So that with God acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which God wanted ... it follows that the books of the Scriptures, must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error **that truth which God wanted put in the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation ...**

... since God speaks in sacred scripture through human beings in a human fashion, the interpreter of sacred scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by the meaning of their words. □

Final reflective sharing

This final sharing of personal responses to the questions given below is the most important phase of the session, and should be entered into generously, in the spirit of the Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp. 14-15.

It may begin with a brief period of silent reflection, which is followed by two stages:

- 1. An informal Buzz Session in which each participant is able to express their response to each question – questions should be discussed separately;*
- 2. The sharing is brought to a conclusion, with each participant expressing, in a few words, what is their personal response to each question – in view of all that has been discussed in the session.*

Questions

- ◆ God's ETERNAL WORD finds expression through the HUMAN WORDS of the inspired authors. Does this truth help you to understand the literature of the Bible, and help resolve some of the difficulties you brought to this session?
- ◆ Does the recognition that the essential message of the Scriptures concerns the ways of God, as they are shown in God's on-going relationship with God's people, help you understand the unity of the biblical literature?
- ◆ What is the most important insight or discovery you have gained in this session?

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SESSION 2

Introductory reading

Gospel of John (1:1-5, 9-14)

This passage concerns the Word of God, the Eternal Son, whose truth finds expression in the Scriptures.

In the beginning was the Word;
the Word was with God
and the Word was God.
He was with God in the beginning.
Through him all things came into being,
not one thing came into being except through him.
What has come into being in him was life,
life that was the light of men;
and light shines in darkness,
and darkness could not overpower it...

The Word was the real light
that gives light to everyone;
he was coming into the world.
He was in the world
that had come into being through him,
and the world did not recognise him.
He came to his own
and his own people did not accept him.
But to those who did accept him
he gave power to become children of God,
to those who believed in his name
who were born not from human stock
or human desire
or human will
but from God himself.
The Word became flesh,
he lived among us,
and we saw his glory,
the glory that he has from the Father as only Son of the Father
full of grace and truth. †

Questions opening up the topic

Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp. 14-15 – sharing reactions to the following questions:

Questions

- ◆ Has the first session given you a better understanding of the Old Testament, and its importance for Christian faith?
- ◆ What questions do you bring to this session concerning the New Testament, particularly the Gospels?

Viewing of DVD

- ◆ Chapter 4:
The New Testament
- ◆ Chapter 5:
The Church's Call to Know the Scriptures

Sharing of reactions to the presentation

Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp. 14-15.

Question

- ◆ What has struck you as enlightening, inspiring, or even puzzling?

A reading related to the theme

*The Resurrection of Christ (1961, pp 24-25)
by Archbishop Michael Ramsey*

The Resurrection of Christ ... concerns the whole relation of mankind to God and of God to mankind. It was an act that summed up God's purpose in history ... The words 'according to the Scriptures' (used in the preaching of the Apostles) had these big implications ... The Resurrection sent the Apostles back to their Bible. There they could see the meaning of the new and marvellous happening. There they could find its relation to the age-long purposes of God.

The Jews never expected that the Messiah would suffer and die, and thus they had never expected that he would rise again. They never included within their messianic expectations the description of the sufferings of the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 53. To them, there were no scriptures that foretold either the Messiah's death or the Messiah's Resurrection. Nor had the idea of his Resurrection entered seriously into the expectation of the disciples of Jesus (cf. Mark 9:10). It seems that the predictions of Jesus gave them no clear conviction, and right up to Easter morning they did not think that the Scriptures in any way foretold the Resurrection.

Yet, when once the event happened, they leaped to the belief that, in the raising of Jesus from the dead, the Scriptures had been fulfilled, and they proclaimed their belief to their fellow-Jews.

Of what Scriptures were the Apostles thinking? ...Beneath the use of proof-texts (after the fashion of rabbinical interpretation) was the conviction that the whole story of God's words and actions in Israel had found its climax and its key in the death and Resurrection of Christ. In the words of one author, 'The entire body of the Scriptures opened its heart to the astonished and rejoicing Apostles' (Scott Holland). ♦

Final reflective sharing

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Questions

- ♦ What is the most important insight you have gained from these two sessions on the Scriptures?
- ♦ What are some practical ways in which we can make the Scriptures better known in our communities?
- ♦ Has this session given you a better appreciation of the unity of the New Testament and its message – as a celebration of what God achieved through the resurrection?

SUMMARY OF PRESENTATION

Though we have usually thought of the Bible as a single book, the Scriptures are a library of books - the rich **literature** in which, inspired by the Holy Spirit, God's people remember how the covenant has called them to a new life and identity.

The **Reformation confrontation** profoundly influenced our attitude to the Scriptures. The Reformers appealed to the authority of "Scripture alone"; Catholics responded by appealing to "Scripture and tradition". Both points of view are open to criticism. Like any literature, the Scriptures only have their full meaning **within the life of the Church**. For a Catholic theology which was widely accepted before the Reformation, "**Tradition**" is not a body of truths complementing the Scriptures, but the whole mystery of the Church's life handed on from age to age with the aid of the Spirit. This point of view, now taken for granted by Catholic theologians, was forgotten in the pressures of the Reformation controversy. The Scriptures are an all-important **part** of Tradition, as the very life of the Church. (Most of us, we will recognise, have been brought up with the idea of "tradition" as a complementary body of truths.)

In the last couple of centuries, **historical scholarship** has brought a new appreciation of the biblical literature. The findings of scholarship seemed, at first, to contradict basic Christian assumptions; but it is now recognised that they have given a sound understanding of the intentions of the authors, and of the over-all development of the biblical texts. God's Word comes to us through a human literature; as a consequence it is important for us to appreciate how that literature assumed its present form.

It is in what God has done for the covenanted people that God's ways are revealed. The Scriptures, therefore, are the record of an on-going **history**, and of the interpretation of that history which has been inspired by the Holy Spirit. The Old Testament's long record of expectation contains **all the main literary forms** of those times.

One great intervention of God is the inspiration of each Testament. The Old Testament is shaped by memory of the **Exodus** from slavery in Egypt. The New Testament is the expression of faith in God's final achievement in the **Resurrection of Christ**.

The New Testament Scriptures developed rapidly and have fewer literary forms. Among these the **Gospel form** is the most important. Modern scholarship helps us to understand this form - an enthusiastic sharing of faith in the Risen Lord. Matthew, Mark and Luke combine story units which have had a previous history into one coherent story of the career of Jesus. Hearing this story, all believers are invited to meet Jesus and to live as his disciples. There is an obvious interdependence of these three gospels. Comparing them brings out what each means to emphasise in the life of Jesus, as they share the faith of the community in which they live. John's gospel, written later, adopts a more meditative and interpretative form, as it recalls the events of Jesus' life.

Paul's letters give us an insight into the faith of the first communities. The **Acts of the Apostles** is a sequel to Luke's gospel, describing events in the early Church. The **Letter to the Hebrews** is a remarkable treatise interpreting the fulfilment of Jewish faith in Christ. The **Apocalypse** is an example of a form of writing common in the time of Christ, reassuring God's people in a time of difficulty, that God's promises will certainly be fulfilled in "a new heaven and a new earth". Fundamentalists are mistaken when they interpret it as describing **how the end will come**.

Vatican II – particularly through the liturgy – has called us to a new appreciation of the Scriptures. Vatican II and later Church teaching confirms the approach of modern scholarship, underlining the human character of the biblical literature – which expresses itself through the scientific and historical outlook of the time. Its God-given message, which is preserved from all error, is **the truth of God's ways and God's saving plan for humanity**.

Modern scholarship of recent decades has enriched our understanding. We should recognize, however, that one does not have to be a scholar to have access to the essential truth of God's generous ways given in the Scriptures. This insight, it should be noted, is misinterpreted by "**Fundamentalists**", who reject the sound insights of modern scholarship, and rely upon a simplistic and sometimes misleading interpretation of the biblical texts. ◇

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