



THE NEW SHOFAR

The word of God is alive and active, sharper indeed than any two-edged sword. It cuts coming and going

October 10

Christianity as a “religion of the book”?

It is not unusual to hear how the three religions – Judaism, Islam and Christianity can be lumped together under this heading: *religions of the book*. That, however, is not entirely true. As Christians we are people of Jesus Christ who is the Word of God made flesh, the Messiah to whom the words of the Bible give witness.

But the Bible is admittedly complicated in its identity. It was created by the Church and at the same time it creates the Church. It has been gifted to us by God as a dynamic witness to the triune God’s (the Trinity) dealings with the people of God.

And so it is not possible to separate off Church from Scripture, or the Scriptures from the Church. They exist in what some call a symbiotic relationship. That is, they are mutually interdependent, working together for the benefit of all and have done so from the earliest days of the Church.

Revelation begins with God

The way to understand what we have in the Bible is to accept it as originating in God, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and expressed in writing by the biblical writers. As Jesus was both human and divine, so too the Sacred Scriptures are both divine and human. This is proclaimed in our liturgies. Readings begin something such as *a reading from the Holy Gospel according to Matthew*. He makes the human contribution but at the end of the reading we proclaim *the Gospel of the Lord*. What Matthew is offering us is nothing less than the voice of Jesus Himself.

We should not underestimate this ancient custom for it was by word alone that God created the world...*and God said...and so it was*. This word sustains and guides all things (check **Psalm 147:15-18**). Remember when God called Jeremiah to prophetic ministry? He touched his mouth and declared *Now I have put my words into your mouth (1:9)*. Isaiah recalls how this has become a reassuring promise from God...*My word shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the things for which I sent it (55:10-11)*. The word of God then, is much more than just words on a page. It is a force *alive and active, cutting like a two-edged sword* as we are reminded in today’s reading from Hebrews. This sits perfectly within the Jewish understanding of the term for “word” (*dabar*). It can mean a *word*, a *thing* or *talk*. Revelation then includes notions such as saving events that are opened up for us, into which we become participants by words. God’s word.

God’s word made manifest in the Word of God, Jesus Christ

The clearest and most powerful, revealing word of God comes to us in the person and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth who is our Saviour, Messiah and the Son of God.

John proclaimed this most eloquently in his Gospel...*in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God...(1:1)...and the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us...(1:14).*

It is for this reason, when we talk about the “authority of Scripture”, we are talking about God’s authority exercised *through* Scripture. But God’s way of exercising divine authority is not like that of a general, a governor or emperor. When Jesus exercises his authority, it is made manifest in healing and the power of his preaching and teaching. All of this comes under the umbrella of the coming of the Kingdom of God in Jesus, a divine rule breaking into a world seriously wounded by corruption, human rebellion, death, idolatry and sin. This is the perspective for reading the Bible – it is something used by God in achieving his divine goal of establishing his Kingdom over all creation. It is one part of God’s ongoing activities in creation and cannot be separated off from this mission. To reduce it to a book of rules or ancient stories; to limit it to a role of information provider, or a record of past revelations is to misunderstand its true nature. The Scripture is there to be a means of God’s actions in and through believers of every generation through to the End.

The Church as a scripture-reading community

Bishop Tom Wright helpfully describes the role of scripture in the Church...*We read scripture in order to be refreshed in our memory and understanding of the story within which we ourselves are actors, to be reminded where it has come from and where it is going to, and hence what our own part within it might be.* The emphases are mine and I stress them because they highlight the dynamic role the Bible has in the mission and ministry of the Church. The Bible – along with the sacraments (the Eucharist in particular), our liturgical activities and works of love – is a missionary tool through which we reassure the world that Jesus is Lord, not Caesar. Through it we are lifted up, given an unquenchable fire for evangelizing the peoples of the earth as it reveals to us the mystery of Jesus the Christ, the liberation that comes from living under divine rule. It comes with a heart-changing power enabling us to bring to *those living in darkness* the healing power of the Holy Spirit.

All of that is inspiring but it only makes sense to outsiders when they experience it first and foremost in the lives of believers. We must be the first to experience and to take up the life-transforming power of what God is doing in establishing his Kingdom among us. If that is not a reality, then there is no point in claiming an independent “authority” for the Bible. The Sacred Scriptures are one part of all God is doing in us and through us in making his all-consuming authority in creation known to all men and women.

This is why gatherings for Bible study are so vital and essential for any renewal of Church and parish life. In them we do not simply learn about what God is doing but discover ways in which we collaborate with the divine actions all around us.