

Three

Scripture and Radiance

In the first chapter we saw that Christ's promise to make himself known to us required as a condition that we keep his word.

"If anyone loves me,
he will keep my word.
Then my Father will love him
and we shall come to him
and make our dwelling place with him" (Jn 14:23,AB).

In Chapter 2 we learned that Jesus is present to us through his word and his Spirit. What is Jesus' word? Where do we find it today? How will it help us experience his presence?

Christ's word reaches us in a number of ways. He instructs us through the word of priests and teachers speaking in his name. He heals and nourishes us through the sacramental word. He encourages and guides us through the words of friends. But, although these are all genuine forms of Jesus speaking to us, they all presuppose the original, historical message spoken by Jesus when he was on earth. The actual words uttered by the incarnate Son of God will always remain the source and inspiration of what he says through his Spirit and his church in later ages. The teaching of the Word made flesh may never be forgotten.

It is not difficult to prove this from the gospels. Rather than presenting a long argument, I propose to list here some of the statements regarding his word. Throughout, I render certain synonyms found in scripture—for example, message, truth, teaching—by

the English term "words," because it is clear in scripture that these synonyms refer indiscriminately to the overall message of Jesus. For simplicity's sake I have also written them in simple, declarative sentences.

I have the words of eternal life.
My words are truth.

The words I speak come from my Father.
My words are life and spirit.
The words I speak will judge you.

Listen to my words.
Hear my words and believe.
Believe my words.
Believe the words I speak.
Believe because of my words.

Accept my words.
Obey my words.
Try to understand my words.
Recall the words I spoke to you.
Keep my words in your heart.
Allow my words to live in you.
Remain loyal to my words.

Do not be ashamed of me or my words.
Watch over my words like a treasure.
Heaven and earth shall pass away,
my words shall never pass away.¹

Jesus tells us that we should take note of his actual words, try to understand them, accept them in faith, treasure them in our hearts and put them into practice. The church, and every Christian for that matter, will always have to return to the actual words of Jesus. I don't mean this in a formalistic or narrow sense. Jesus spoke in Aramaic and the Aramaic idiom, obviously, is not of the essence. Many of Jesus' statements were prophetic and exemplary in purpose; they may never be taken as dogmatic propositions. Nothing would be further from Jesus' mind than wanting his words fol-

lowed in a fundamentalistic, literalistic manner. Yet, precisely because the Word became flesh and spoke human language, his actual words should always remain the vehicle of contact with future generations. This is why the gospels, why the whole of scripture, is so important for our Christian experience of God.

From "Word" to "Scripture"

The word of Jesus is Sacred Scripture. This may seem a bold assertion. At first sight there might appear to be a vast distance between the sermons Jesus preached in Palestine and our present New Testament. Are we allowed to equate his spoken message with texts that were committed to writing many years afterward?

To do justice to this question, we have to remember how the New Testament arose. We have already seen in Chapter 2 that Jesus taught as a rabbi. He taught his disciples parables and instructions they had to learn by heart. The gospel mentions repeatedly that Jesus did not do all the preaching alone. "Then he sent them out to preach the Kingdom of God" (Lk 9:2). "After this the Lord chose another seventy-two men and sent them out two by two" (Lk 10:1). Since Jesus' disciples were not expected to preach their own message, but Jesus' word, Jesus must have prepared them for this task by providing rather exact formulations of his message. When the disciples went out, they did so armed with a stock of preaching material: parables and comparisons, prophecies and revelations of Jesus, summaries of Jesus' debates with the Pharisees, accounts of Jesus' signs. Even before the resurrection, Jesus' preaching had been given a definite form in a collection of oral traditions.²

After Jesus' resurrection his words and deeds were seen in a new perspective. To the earlier traditions were added accounts of his passion and Eas-

ter appearances. With the need of instructing ever more catechumens, further explanations and additions arose. Teachers started grouping different elements of the traditions in handy collections: strings of miracles; parables; instructions for various groups; sayings referring to the same topic, such as persecution,³ etc. Whereas Jews were used to learning things by heart, non-Jews were not, and so there was a tendency to write down the traditions as soon as they were translated into Greek. At a later stage, in different parts of the early church the need was felt for an integrated presentation of Jesus, his work and his teaching. The outcome was the four gospels, four harmonious interpretations based on the oral traditions and written collections. The meaning of Jesus' teaching was further worked out in letters written by the apostles to the early communities and in books such as the Acts of the Apostles and Revelation.

The word developed from oral teaching to written text, from simple record to theological interpretation, from loose traditions to an integrated presentation. Such a development was dictated by the growth and expansion of the church. It was unavoidable. In fact, it was a process of the "maturing" of the word, intended by Christ himself. "I have much more to tell you, but now it would be too much for you to bear. When, however, the Spirit comes, who reveals the truth about God, he will lead you into all the truth" (Jn 16:12-13). The word of Jesus *could not* be fully understood before the resurrection. The church needed the experience of Easter and the awareness of its role in the world for an adequate appreciation of the word of Jesus. The New Testament does not only contain "words" of Jesus in direct quotations attributed to him; it is in its totality a fuller, matured expression of Jesus' word.

There is more. As Karl Rahner has pointed out, the church of apostolic times had the duty of expressing her faith as a lasting norm for the future. This

expression of faith resulted in scripture. By founding an apostolic church, God called forth the inspired word that was to remain a constitutive element of the church of all time to come. Or, to put it differently, the apostolic church had the task not merely of preaching the word of Jesus, but of enshrining it in an adequate and lasting written testimony. The New Testament is the word of Jesus laid down as the foundation of the Christian community.⁴

The Old Testament too is related to Jesus' word. The Old Testament was inspired with a view to preparing the way for Jesus. In a certain sense the Old Testament was completed only when the New Testament came about. It received its full meaning from Jesus' word. Jesus' word sealed the Old Testament and the apostolic church acknowledged it as its own prehistory. The Old Testament, too, is an extension of the word of Jesus: It is the past in which it is rooted.⁵

There are many ways in which the word of Jesus can come to us. However, the chief and principal manner in which it has been preserved for us is Sacred Scripture. Scripture enshrines the message Jesus spoke. If we want to hear his word, we cannot afford to neglect scripture. St. Jerome was quite right when he stated: "Ignorance of Scripture means ignorance of Christ."

The Seed and the Fruit

In Section 2 of this book—when narrating the experience of the saints—I will describe specific ways in which Sacred Scripture can form a starting point for meetings with Christ. Here I would like to discuss a more general question. Quite a few Christians today think the Bible is hardly necessary or useful in practical life. Rather than wasting time reading scripture, they maintain, we should be involved in contemporary problems. The Christian should go out to meet Christ

in the hungry, the naked and the oppressed. The test of Christian faith is not our fidelity to reading scripture, but our commitment to promoting the welfare and happiness of others.

There are valid points in these remarks. It is deeds that count, not words. Religious practices, including bible reading, may cover up an attempt to escape from real involvement and commitment. On the other hand, the opposite is equally true. Preoccupation with work and activity may disguise an inability or unwillingness to face deep religious questions. The search for a personal encounter with God is at times abandoned under the pretext of working in his name.

What did Jesus himself say about the relationship of his word to activity and involvement? He compared the word to seed, Christian commitment to its fruit. In the parable of the sower he described what may happen to the seed: It may be eaten by birds, it may fall on rocky ground, it may be stifled by thistles, or it may take root in fertile soil. The success of the whole operation depends on circumstances and the disposition of the receivers. But the whole process is begun, is made possible, by God's word. "The sower sows God's message" (Mk 4:14). "The seed is the word of God" (Lk 8:11). The seed is not sown for its own sake; its only purpose is to produce a harvest. But there will be no harvest without seed.

Christ wants us to live committed Christian lives, lives that translate his laws of charity into practice. "My Father's glory is shown by your bearing much fruit" (Jn 15:8). However, such fruit cannot be produced unless we remain firmly attached to Jesus. "A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it can do so only if it remains in the vine. In the same way you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me" (Jn 15:4). We can only remain in Jesus, however, if "my words remain in you" (Jn 15:7). In this allegory of the vine and the branches, Jesus' words are like the sap that flows into the

branches so that they may bring forth grapes. Particularly interesting in Jesus' words is the connection between "remaining in his word" and "giving glory to the Father." For knowing God's glory is the essence of the New Testament.

The God who said, "Out of darkness the light shall shine!" is the same God who has made his light shine in our hearts, to bring us the knowledge of God's glory shining in the face of Christ (2 Cor 4:6).

The essence of our Christian life is a new light which God creates in our hearts. God himself *is* light. He reveals his inner nature by the radiance of his love. This light, this love, radiates especially from the face of Christ who is the perfect revelation of the Father. As God began our existence with a creative word, "Let there be light," so Jesus initiates our life as adopted children of God by his message of love. The light which God creates in the heart of the Christian makes him *know*—that is, experience—God's radiance as it shines in the face of Christ.

*God's Radiance*⁶

The word for "glory" in Greek is *doxa*, which is itself the Septuagint equivalent of Hebrew *kabôd*. In the New Testament *doxa* is never used with the ordinary Greek meaning of "opinion." It always follows the specific scriptural meanings given to it by Old Testament usage. The original meaning of *kabôd* is "heaviness," in the sense of importance, of having weight and momentum. When applied to God it indicates that quality by which God communicates his greatness to us by showing us his mighty deeds.

It implies that which makes God impressive to man, the force of his self-manifestation. As everywhere attested in the Old Testament, God is intrinsically invisible. Nevertheless, when he reveals himself, e.g., in meteorological phenomena, one may rightly speak of

the *kabôd* of Yahweh, of the manifestation that makes on man a highly significant impression.⁷

In English, *kabôd* has generally been translated as "glory." I prefer to render it as "radiance"—and have done so in the bible quotations remaining in this chapter (see italicized words)—partly because this term is more meaningful in our own day than the bookish expression "glory" and partly because "radiance" corresponds more closely to the scriptural concept.

The nature of the *kabôd* itself (as seen in Ex 40:34-35) is to be conceived as a radiant, fiery substance. There proceeds from it fire which consumes the awaiting sacrifice, and after speaking with God, Moses has a radiance of countenance which dazzles the Israelites.⁸

Ezekiel gives a description in his opening vision. God himself came in a storm "with brightness round about it, and fire flashing forth continually" (Ez 1:4,RSV). He was surrounded by cherubim and seated on a chariot. God himself was only seen indirectly, as a brilliant, luminous silhouette in human shape.

High up on the throne was a being that looked like a man. I saw him shine like bronze, and close to and all around him from what seemed his loins upwards was what looked like fire; and from what seemed his loins downwards I saw what looked like fire, and a light all round like a bow in the clouds on rainy days; that is how the surrounding light appeared. It was something that looked like the *radiance* of Yahweh (Ez 1:26b-28b,JB).

God's radiance is visible in the created world (Is 6:3; Ps 57:5). But God's radiance is manifested particularly by his saving deeds:

"So shall I *show a radiance* at the expense of Pharaoh, of all his army, his chariots, his horsemen" (Ex 14:17,JB).

"Yahweh I sing: he has covered himself in *radiance*, horse and rider he has thrown into the sea" (Ex 15:1,JB).

Also the new exodus announced by Deutero-Isaiah will manifest God's radiance:

"Then the *radiance* of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind will see it" (Is 40:5).

The mightiest manifestation of God's radiance is the exaltation of the Risen Christ:

He was made visible in the flesh,
attested by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed to the pagans,
believed in by the world,
taken up *with radiance* (1 Tm 3:16,JB).

Stephen saw "*the radiance of God* and Jesus standing at the right side of God" (Acts 7:55). The exaltation of Christ will be completed at the Last Judgment, "when the *radiance* of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ will appear" (Ti 2:13). At his transfiguration, Jesus gave to the three apostles an anticipated view of the radiance he was to possess. "They woke up and saw Jesus' *radiance*" (Lk 9:32).

Radiance and the Effect of God's Word

In the Old Testament, God's radiance was understood to be a manifestation of the divine majesty. We need not be surprised that, generally speaking, human beings could not be said to partake of the divine radiance. Men and women may *see* God's radiance (Is 35:2, 66:18); they cannot share it.

A notable exception was what had happened to Moses. This need not surprise us. Moses was considered exceptional for many reasons. It was he who mediated the covenant at Sinai that would change Israel's history forever. It was Moses who performed miracles and wonders that surpassed those of all other prophets. But, most of all, Moses was known to be exceptional on account of his close familiarity with God. "There has never been a prophet in Israel like

Moses; the LORD spoke with him face-to-face" (Dt 34:10). If someone has experienced God in such an intimate way, what is more natural than that the effects can be observed?

When God appeared to Moses in the beginning, he showed himself "in the shape of a flame of fire, coming from the middle of a bush" (Ex 3:2,JB). Even at that early stage Moses was overcome by God's presence. He put off his shoes, covered his face, and listened to God's word with his forehead touching the ground. But on Mount Sinai he was even closer to God. When he requested, "Show me your *radiance*" (Ex 33:18,JB), God showed him a glimpse of himself. God's radiance passed by him and God spoke infinitely tender words: "I, the LORD, am a God who is full of compassion and pity, who is not easily angered and who shows great love and faithfulness" (Ex 34:6). God stood near Moses and pronounced his own name, "Yahweh." Again Moses responded by worshipping God, face to the ground.

"When Moses went down from Mount Sinai carrying the Ten Commandments, his face was shining because he had been speaking with the LORD; but he did not know it" (Ex 34:29). The people were frightened by the radiance on his face. They did not dare to approach him. For this reason, Moses had to cover his face with a veil. He took the veil off only when entering the tent of the Lord's presence to speak to God. "When he came out, he would tell the people of Israel everything that he had been commanded to say, and they would see that his face was shining. Then he would put the veil back on until the next time he went to speak to the LORD" (Ex 34:34-35). Because Moses was full of God's presence and carrying his word, he shared in his radiance.

St. Paul takes up this example from the Old Testament to illustrate what happens to us through our contact with Christ. God's speaking to Moses was

visible on his face; so too Jesus' speaking to us in the Spirit is visible in us. In the Old Testament God's word was still restricted, it was to some extent a "dead" word, a written text; in the New Testament Christ gave us a living word, a word constantly made relevant through his Spirit. The following passage should be carefully read. The last verse quoted is especially important.

The Law was carved in letters on stone tablets, and God's *radiance* appeared when it was given. Even though the brightness on Moses' face was fading, it was so strong that the people of Israel could not keep their eyes fixed on him. If the Law, which brings death when it is in force, came with such *radiance*, how much greater is the *radiance* that belongs to the activity of the Spirit! The system which brings condemnation was *radiant*; how much more *radiant* is the activity which brings salvation! We may say that because of the far brighter *radiance* now the *radiance* that was so bright in the past is gone. For if there was *radiance* in that which lasted for a while, how much more *radiance* is there in that which lasts forever!

Because we have this hope, we are very bold. We are not like Moses, who had to put a veil over his face so that the people of Israel would not see the brightness fade and disappear. Their minds, indeed, were closed; and to this very day their minds are covered with the same veil as they read the books of the old covenant. The veil is removed only when a person is joined to Christ. Even today, whenever they read the Law of Moses, the veil still covers their minds. But it can be removed, as the scripture says about Moses: "His veil was removed when he turned to the Lord." Now, "the Lord" in this passage is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is present, there is freedom. All of us, then, reflect the *radiance* of the Lord with uncovered faces; and that same *radiance*, coming from the Lord, who is the Spirit, transforms us into his likeness in an ever greater degree of *radiance* (2 Cor 3:7-18).

This is, indeed, a bold statement. Paul claims that

God speaks to us, as he did to Moses, face to face, and that this makes our lives radiant. Christ speaks through his word and his Spirit. We are transformed by it into an ever greater likeness of Christ. The word of God kindles a fire in our heart that shines through in our words and deeds. The inner experience of Christ's presence changes our personality.

The God who said, "Out of darkness the light shall shine!" is the same God who made his light shine in our hearts, to bring us to the knowledge of God's *radiance* shining in the face of Christ (2 Cor 4:6).

What Scripture Should Do

From this chapter we may be able to piece together a rather complete picture of what the study of scripture means in our lives.

To remain in touch with Jesus we have to absorb scripture. Scripture contains that word which Jesus so earnestly commanded us to hear, to remember and to put into practice. By meditating on scripture we make it possible for Jesus to work in us and transform our lives.

Even though the word is contained in the written text of the Old and New Testaments, it is not a dead or static entity. Rather it is like a seed. It contains life. It can grow. A word spoken by Jesus, sown in our heart, can become the starting point of a new commitment, a new kind of life.

The word is the life-giving sap by which Jesus nourishes our interior life. Together with the sacramental graces he imparts, Jesus keeps us strong and fresh with the words he addresses to us. Thus we can produce fruits, the acts of selfless love and charity that prove us to be his disciples.

Jesus' word kindles a light in our hearts. This light

makes us aware of his presence, aware also of the activity of his Spirit in us. Jesus' light shines from within us. Gradually it transforms us into his likeness so that Jesus' presence in us becomes visible in what we say and do.

Reflection on scripture is not the study of an ancient text, a struggle with concepts and words. Rather it should be a living encounter with Christ whom we meet in his word and his Spirit. The written text is no more than a seed or a spark. In the radiance and the fire that ensue, the Spirit takes over.

Conclusion

Our starting point was Jesus' promise:

“Whoever keeps the commandments that he has from me
is the man who loves me;
and the man who loves me will be loved by my Father,
and I shall love him
and reveal myself to him” (Jn 14:21,AB).

We may now be in a position to appreciate the full meaning of these words:

Jesus promised he would give us
a real experience of himself.

He will manifest himself
so that we know
his love
and his living presence
in us.

To receive this gift
we need
to accept his words,
absorb them,
put them into practice.

If we show our love in this way,
he will fill us abundantly
with his Spirit
with his love.

We will radiate Christ
in our lives.

We will know him
with a knowledge
enkindled by love.