



**Scripture Day:
Unlocking the Mystery of the Bible
Friday 19 June 2020**

For many of us the Bible is something we are very familiar with. It is part of our daily lives as Christians through the readings we hear at Mass, in our private reading of it and perhaps from our childhood studies. However, at the same time, the Bible often has a mysterious aura to it. The sheer volume of books, the variety of characters and themes contained within it, the challenging stories and even the characteristics and actions of God, provoke questions which are difficult and deserve our attention. In this presentation I will endeavour to journey through the key themes found in both the Old and New Testaments and demonstrate how the Bible is a collection of writings written by human hand, but inspired by God, which reveal God's love and his saving plan for us.

The word revelation means 'to uncover' or 'remove a veil'. God's revelation has been made known in many ways throughout the course of history. Indeed God continues to reveal his mystery to us in this present day through the beauty of his created world and through our capacity to appreciate his love through our human reason. The Bible is also a source of God's revelation or divine revelation as it is often called. God revealed himself throughout the Bible in what he said to us, and what he did for us, by his words and deeds.

The Bible is not a single composition but rather a collection or a library of books. It contains seventy three in total, forty six in the Old Testament and twenty seven in the New Testament. The books as we now know them were not all written as a single body of work or by one author. In many cases, especially in the Old Testament, writings were redacted or edited to produce the finished books which we have in scripture. The books are not arranged in chronological order of when they were composed as they were written over many centuries by many different human authors in several languages. However, despite this broad scope, the Bible is also a unified whole because all its books are inspired by the Holy Spirit. One of the four constitutions of the Second Vatican Council, Dei Verbum – translated as 'God's Word', gives us an insight into the provenance and authority of scripture in chapter 3.

"Those divinely revealed realities which are contained and presented in Sacred Scripture have been committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For holy mother Church, relying on the belief of the Apostles, holds that the books of both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself."

What is clear here is that as God inspired the Bible's human authors, he is the principal author of Scripture. By scripture we mean holy writings, hence the phrase Sacred Scripture is often used when referring to the Bible. Sacred Scriptures take the reader on a journey through events in the history of God's people, crucial events where God's plan is revealed. This is known as salvation history. The culmination of salvation history is the resurrection of Our Lord, Jesus.



St. Augustine, a fourth century Bishop from Northern Africa, famously said that the Old Testament is the New Testament concealed and the New Testament is the Old Testament revealed. I will endeavour to draw links from both testaments to highlight how correct Augustine was.

The word testament comes from the Latin word *Testamentum* which means covenant. A covenant is a contract, and in reference to scripture it means a contract or agreement initiated by God, between himself and his people. The Old Testament is the first and largest part of sacred scriptures. It tells how God made a series of covenants with his people Israel, in which he promised blessings in return for loving obedience. The majority of books in our Old Testament were originally written in Hebrew, a Semitic language which was the language of the Israelites. The books of the Old Testament can be grouped together in the following way: Firstly the Pentateuch, or first five books. Secondly, the Historical books which tell us about the history of God's people, including the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. Thirdly, the books of Wisdom such as Job, Psalms and Proverbs. Finally, the Prophetic books which contain the writings of the prophets including Isaiah, Jeremiah and Daniel. I will refer to many, but not all of these books.

The first book, Genesis comes from the Hebrew word '*Bereshit*', a word which means '*beginnings*'. This book is best understood in two halves. Chapters 1 – 11 is often called the Genesis Prologue and covers the key topics of creation and the relationship between God and his people. These early chapters tell us a great deal about God and his creation, which was ultimately done as an act of love. Genesis 1 gives us the following: that God created everything in existence from nothing; creation ex-nihilo, that God was pleased with his creation and that human beings are the high point of creation as we alone are created in his image and likeness and we therefore have responsibility for the rest of creation. These truths are wonderful. In Genesis 3 we read how humankind turned away from God and committed sin in the Garden of Eden by eating fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. This event is known as The Fall, because perfection in creation had been broken by human disobedience to God. It is from this point that the relationship between God and humans needed to be repaired. In chapter four Cain kills his brother Abel! So early in Scripture and so soon after creation we have the sin of murder. Chapters 6 - 9 contain the story of Noah and the Flood. Humanity had become so sinful that God desired to destroy most of his creation. Noah, his wife, his three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth, along with their wives, were found to be righteous and blameless before God. They built an Ark and sheltered in it for the duration of the Flood. After the Flood has subsided God makes a covenant with Noah and vows never again to destroy all flesh. The sign of this covenant is the bow in the clouds; the rainbow.

However, for many of us these chapters raise questions about their veracity in light of our understanding of life and the universe. How can we reconcile Genesis 1 with scientific understandings of the origins of the universe and life, such as the Big Bang and the theory of evolution? How should we read these chapters? What value do they actually hold for us? Firstly it is important to remember that scripture is God's word, not a historical or scientific account. We should not read these words literally but rather interpret them under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and in accordance with Church teaching. The Catechism teaches that the narratives of the Creation and Fall are primitive stories, but that they contain essential truths within them: God creates everything and all life is dependent on him, order and life come forth from God's act of speech, '*Let there be light*'. There is no conflict between genuine science and these accounts.



Chapters 12 - 50 form the second part of the book of Genesis. The focus now becomes one group of people whom God calls from all the peoples of the earth into a special relationship with him. It is in these chapters that we read about the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In chapter 12 God calls Abraham, who is childless, out of his home at Ur (in modern day Iraq) and gives him a threefold promise; land, descendants and blessings. Abraham responds generously and in faith to God despite his uncertainties that such promises could be fulfilled. Abraham is our father in faith and God's covenant with him can be read in chapters 15 and 17. At times he attempts to bring God's promises to fruition by his own volition; most notably through his son Ishmael who is born to his wife's servant, Hagar. However it is on God's terms that the promises come to fruition. Isaac, his son to his wife Sarah is born and is the child of the covenant. Abraham is asked by God to sacrifice his son Isaac in chapter 22. This is a test of his faith and a precursor to the sacrifice of Jesus on Calvary. Tertullian, the Early Church Father, draws a comparison between Isaac carrying the wood for his sacrifice and Jesus carrying his cross. Not wishing to fail God again, Abraham acquiesces to this divine instruction. Abraham's faith is proven and a lamb takes the place of Isaac, *"Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son from me."* (Gen 22:12).

Returning to the threefold promise of the covenant between God and Abraham we can read in scripture how each one is fulfilled. The promise of land is fulfilled in Moses when the Israelites are liberated from slavery in Egypt. The promise of descendants is fulfilled in the covenant made with David in the Second Book of Samuel. The final promise of blessings is fulfilled in Jesus who is the new and everlasting covenant as we read in the Gospels.

Jacob is the third patriarch and the second son of Isaac and his wife Rebecca. He buys his brother Esau's birth right and with the help of his mother deceives Isaac into giving him his deathbed blessing. Jacob flees his homeland and has twelve sons and one daughter to his two wives and two concubines. It is one of Jacob's sons who is focus of perhaps one of the best known and loved Old Testament stories; that of Joseph, his coat of many colours and his time in Egypt. He was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers but rose to become the second most powerful man in Egypt next to the Pharaoh. The offspring of Jacob's sons become the twelve tribes of Israel following the Exodus when the Israelites settled in the land of Canaan. It is Jacob who has the dream of a ladder reaching up to the heavens with Angels ascending and descending. Chapter 32 tells us about his wrestle with a figure throughout the night. When daybreak arrives and neither has prevailed, Jacob's name is changed by the figure to Israel, meaning one who struggles with God.

Perhaps the most widely known story of the Old Testament is that of the Exodus from Egypt of the Israelites and the Law given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. This is the central event of the Old Testament, in which we read about God's liberation of his chosen people and the establishment of the law which they live by. We read about it in the second book of the Pentateuch called Exodus. Over 400 years had passed since Jacob and his family had arrived in Egypt due to famine. The Israelites had become numerous and posed a threat to the Pharaoh so were enslaved. God calls Moses from a Burning Bush and gives him the seemingly impossible task of delivering the Israelites from slavery.

Pharaoh's heart is hardened after the tenth plague and the death of his son and freedom is granted. The Passover meal which follows is the most important redemptive event in Israel's history and became an annual festival which was celebrated by Jesus and still by Jews today. The crossing of the Red Sea is identified in the Catechism as a type of Baptism. The name Moses means to draw out and



through his leadership the Israelites were brought out from slavery, in the same manner in which we as Christians are delivered from sin through the sacrament of Baptism. God continued to provide for his people when they are in the wilderness after their liberation. Manna fell from heaven in the form of dew and when the Israelites asked Moses what it was, he said to them *"It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat."* The Manna from heaven is seen as a precursor to the Eucharist and is referenced in John's Gospel chapter 6, *"I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die."* The law which Moses received from God on Mt. Sinai is called the Mosaic or Sinaitic Covenant. It came in two parts, the written law and oral law. The Ten Commandments being the best known part of it were inscribed on two tablets of stone and reserved in the Ark of the Covenant. To reference Dei Verbum again, we can see God's plan clearly at work in the Old Testament in drawing his people into an ever closer covenant relationship with him.

'In carefully planning and preparing the salvation of the whole human race the God of infinite love, by a special dispensation, chose for Himself a people to whom he would entrust His promises. First He entered into a covenant with Abraham and, through Moses, with the people of Israel. To this people which He had acquired for Himself, He so manifested Himself through words and deeds as the one true and living God that Israel came to know by experience the ways of God with men.'

Moving now to the second group of books in the Old Testament, the Historical books, which are roughly in chronological order and continue the history of the Israelites. The Book of Joshua depicts Israel taking possession of the land of Canaan, including the capture of Jericho. Judges collects stories about the leaders of early Israel, such as Gideon, Samson and Deborah, in the two hundred years before the emergence of the monarchy. After the tale of Ruth, a short and beautiful book, which almost stands alone, demonstrating how non-Israelites can have a place in God's plan for Israel, we move to the two Books of Samuel which tell of the rise and fall of Saul, Israel's first king, and the succession and successes of David. The monarchy was a controversial concept for the Israelites. Their uniqueness from other nations lay in their covenant relationship with the one true God. However human insecurity, mainly in regard to the threat posed by the Philistines, meant that the call for a monarchy became a reality. King David, the second monarch was a charismatic man, who slayed Goliath the Philistine warrior and became Israel's greatest King. He captured Jerusalem and brought the Ark of the Covenant to the holy city. David also displayed his human weakness by committing adultery with Bathsheba and causing the death of Uriah her husband. However God also made a covenant with David which fulfilled and expanded on the second covenant promise to Abraham. It was through David's blood line that Jesus, the Messiah would be born.

'I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever...Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.' (2 Samuel 13, 16)

Matthew's Gospel begins with the genealogy of Jesus;

'An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.'

Thus providing a very clear link between the two Testaments and the fulfilment of the covenant.

The Books of Kings continue the history with the death of David and the anointing of Solomon as the third King of Israel. It was Solomon, known for his wisdom, who built the first Jerusalem Temple. This became a permanent dwelling place for the Ark of the Covenant and a place of worship and sacrifice



for the Israelites. Following Solomon's death the kingdom of Israel became divided due to internal fighting. The division resulted in two kingdoms; Israel in the north with Samaria as its capital and Judah in the south with Jerusalem. The united monarchy had only lasted for the reign of three kings! The Northern Kingdom, Israel, fell at the hands of the Assyrian invaders in 722 B.C. The Southern Kingdom of Judah, was invaded by the Babylonians and the Temple destroyed in 587 B.C. The people of Judah were lead into exile in Babylon, a captivity which lasted 70 years.

The Wisdom Books provide us with a distinctly different genre from what we have thus far encountered. The focus is no longer legal or historical but rather on the relationship between God and humankind. The Book of Job is rich in theology and presents us with the problem of suffering in light of an omnipotent God. Job, a righteous man, questions God for the suffering he has to endure despite his faithfulness. Through a series of dialogues Job learns that God's wisdom is greater than human understanding. The Book of Psalms is a collection of 150 Psalms, arranged in five sections, which are hymns to God. Many are in praise of God, others are laments and some give thanks to God. All however are both witness and instrument of Israel's response to what God has done for his covenant people. Traditionally they were attributed to King David. However, although some can be dated from this time, many are much later and even from after the Exile. The Psalms form the core of the Divine Office. Other wisdom books include Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

The Prophetical Books form the final collection of books in the Old Testament and can be grouped into the following categories: the Major Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel; the twelve Minor Prophets which include the shorter books Hosea, Amos and Jonah; Apocalyptic literature, which is mostly Daniel but also parts of Isaiah and Zechariah. The Prophetical books contain stories and oracles from prophets from about the eighth century BC up to the Babylonian Exile, during the Exile itself and indeed after this event. They were raised up and called by God to act as his mouthpiece and their message was to direct the Israelites back to their covenant relationship with God and reject sin and idolatry. Due to this many of the prophets faced ridicule, persecution and even danger to life. Most of the prophets preached to the kingdom of Judah, but Amos and Hosea preached in Israel. The message of Jonah was to Israel and all the nations.

The revelation the Prophets received is often depicted in visions, dreams and other symbolic events. Ezekiel has a vision of a Valley of Dry Bones in which the bones took on flesh and received the breath of life once again. This story served to give hope to the Israelites during the Exile that they would be restored as a nation under God's command. Jeremiah carried a yoke across his shoulders to show that submission to Babylon was necessary and a result of turning away from God's covenant. Hosea was instructed to marry an unfaithful wife in order to represent the disobedience of Israel towards God. Micah contains the well known and loved verse, *'To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.'*

We hear frequently during the seasons of Advent and Lent from the prophet Isaiah. His writings tell us about a coming Messiah and foretell the suffering that he will endure for our sake.

'He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth: like a lamb that is led to the slaughter and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.' (Isaiah 53:7)



Isaiah also alludes to the ministry of Jesus the Messiah, *'The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me: he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'* (Isaiah 61:1-2) These words are repeated by Jesus himself in Luke's Gospel, when he reads from the scroll at the synagogue at the beginning of his public ministry.

Moving now to the New Testament, the second part of the Bible and a much shorter one too. Most of us will probably be more familiar with the content of the New Testament and rightly so as it contains the new and everlasting covenant established through Jesus as the incarnate God. God made a series of covenants in the Old Testament to draw his people into an ever deeper relationship with him. In the New Testament we have the final covenant in the person of Jesus. As in the case with much of the Old Testament, the stories about Jesus were circulated orally among the Early Christians for decades after his death and resurrection before anything was recorded in the written word. For the authors of the New Testament, the Old Testament was Holy Scripture. That meant the New Testament authors read the events of the Old Testament as looking forward to Christ as the Messiah of his people. For example: In the opening of Genesis, God spoke a divine word to create the world, so in the opening of the Gospel of John, God, in the Word of God, re-created and renewed the world. The four Gospels are at the heart of the New Testament and reveal the good news of Jesus Christ, which is shared with us every time we attend Mass.

Dei Verbum stressed their primacy within the New Testament, *'...the Gospels have a special pre-eminence, and rightly so, for they are the principal witnesses for the life and teaching of the incarnate Word, our saviour.'* (Chapter 18)

Many scholars believe that the Gospels are anonymous, but that each came to be identified with the apostles or a close associate of them. Matthew one of the twelve; Mark the companion of Peter; Luke is mentioned in the Paul's letters and John identified as the one who had a special relationship with Jesus. Each of the Evangelists, a word which means to preach the Gospel and is used in reference to the Gospel writers, has a symbol which gives identity to the theme of their Gospel. These symbols are often presented on lecterns. Matthew is represented by a divine man because his Gospel begins with Jesus' genealogy and his entry into the world as the incarnation. Mark's symbol is that of a winged lion, a figure of courage which represents Jesus' resurrection and the belief that Christians should be courageous in face of persecution. A winged Ox is Luke's symbol and this represents sacrifice. Luke's Gospel begins with the sacrificial priestly duties of Zechariah at the Temple in Jerusalem, who then receives the announcement of the birth of his son, John the Baptist. John's Gospel has the symbol of an eagle which represents his description as Jesus as the word, the Logos. His Gospel engages with higher Christology than the other three. While each of these symbols focuses on the particular theme of a Gospel, only in penetrating all four Gospels do we encounter fully the mission of Jesus as the word made flesh.

The first three Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the Synoptic Gospels because they share much common content and parallels can be made between them. They were written between 64-90AD, Mark being the earliest. John's Gospel is believed to have been written last, towards the end of the first century. As the Apostolic Age came to an end and the Church continued to grow, the need arose to hand on the message of Jesus in a permanent form. The Gospels were written in Greek, the common language of the Eastern Mediterranean and a legacy of Greek civilization. Although other Gospels were composed, the Church recognised the above four as authoritative and



included them in the Canon (authoritative list) of scripture. The Church teaches that the Gospels are also historical, as Pope Benedict says in his book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, “*I believe that this Jesus, the Jesus of the Gospels, is a historically plausible and convincing figure*”.

Despite variance in content across the Gospels, for example, Matthew and Luke include the Nativity of Jesus, Mark does not and John gives a more theological account with ‘the word becoming flesh’, all do contain stories from Jesus’ life and mission. As Christians we will be familiar with the famous parables which were used by Jesus to teach about the Kingdom of God, such as the Parables of the Sower, the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son and the house built on rock. The parables were a teaching method used by Jesus to help all disciples grow in love and understanding of God’s love and infinite mercy. Likewise the miracles of Jesus, such as the calming of the storm, the multiplication of the loaves and fish and the healing of the paralysed man, demonstrate his divine attributes and often reflect a response to faith. The Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew and Luke’s Gospels, provide us with a rich body of teaching to bring us into a deeper relationship with Jesus and teach us the Lord’s Prayer. The Beatitudes give us guidance for life, *‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted, Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God.’* The Sermon echoes the mountain top encounter Moses had with God on Mt Sinai, but in this case Jesus is the fulfilment of the Law. The meal which Jesus shared with his Apostles the night before he died is recorded in all Gospels and in St. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians and from this we have the sacrament of the Eucharist, the great sacrament of thanksgiving.

The central message of all the Gospels is the love of Jesus which was made known by his death for us on the cross and his victory over death with his resurrection. Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, begins with the following lines: *‘The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew.’* As Christians we are called to live the joy of the Gospel in our mission here on earth.

The Acts of the Apostles follows the Gospel of John and is the sequel to the Gospel of Luke, written by the same author. It tells us about the growth of the Early Church from the time the Apostles received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The joys and struggles of the Church are apparent as it came to terms and developed within Roman culture. We read about the first Christian martyr, Stephen. The book also covers the missions of Peter and Paul. Peter, in the early chapters of Acts, to the Jewish converts to Christianity in Jerusalem and then throughout Judea and Samaria. Paul in the latter chapters, to the Gentile converts throughout the wider world, following his famous conversion on the road to Damascus. Both men gave their lives for the mission of the risen Jesus and are foundational to our Church.

The letters of St. Paul follow Acts and contribute a large proportion of the New Testament and tell us about the communities of believers Paul founded during his apostolic journeys at places such as Ephesus and Galatia. In their own right, the Pauline letters is a rich body of scripture and deserve our attention. Central to Paul’s message is the firm belief that his authority rests on having been commissioned by the risen Jesus.

The final book of scripture is the Book of Revelation, which is attributed to John the apostle. It is addressed to the seven churches of Asia Minor and the only apocalyptic book in the New Testament.



A series of visions depict the process by which God will accomplish defeating the powers of evil and establish his universal rule over creation.

Christians believe God had one plan for salvation that was revealed first to the Israelites and then to all peoples through Jesus Christ. The New Testament and Old Testament, then, tell one ongoing story of salvation. The New Testament speaks to us about Jesus Christ, the Messiah and the fulfilment of prophecy. He is the incarnation and the final revelation of God. He has returned to his Father in heaven having completed his work. There is no more public revelation until he returns at the end of time. Christ is present in the scriptures, especially the Gospels, just as he is present in the Eucharist. The Liturgy of the Word prepares us for the Liturgy of the Eucharist; we listen to God and then we receive him. This point was made so eloquently in the words of the offertory hymn, *In Bread we bring you Lord, by the late Fr. Kevin Nichols, For we have gladly heard your Word, your holy Word And now in answer, Lord, our gifts we bring.*

I would like to finish with a line from the Book of Samuel which should encourage us to open our hearts to the word of God in scripture and allow God to speak to us. *'And Samuel said, "Speak Lord for your servant is listening."* (1 Sam 3:10)