

called to a common action together after the long preparation of waiting, of solitary struggle and mysterious vision.

Perhaps 'common action' may give us a clue to the fuller and more living experience of the liturgical life of the Church. A liturgical 'movement' by itself is somehow a sterile counterfeit of a living organism, only too likely to lead to the pride and bickerings of an esoteric perfectionism. When we meet round the altar to receive the bread of life we are by this act committing ourselves to each other as members of a single Mystical Body and the Liturgy is thus both the source and the flowering of this giving of ourselves. To give and to open with the whole man—with our heart and body as well as our mind—is this where we begin?



## BIBLE READING<sup>1</sup>

NICOLETE GRAY

**T**HE Bible reading which I want to write about, is that which I have practised, the Bible reading of parents and children together; which is indeed the only way in which I have read the Bible—apart from the experience of listening to the lessons in the Church of England as a child, and some rather unsuccessful attempts to read parts to myself in later years. As a family we have read it daily, in principle—though in practice there have been a good many gaps—for ten years or more—that is, from earliest childhood in the case of the youngest, to manhood in the case of the eldest child. In this paper I want to offer some reflections on our experience in the hope that they may be useful to others. Our main experience, that constant Bible reading from childhood is overwhelmingly a good thing, is something which surely goes without saying. I propose discussing practical questions of how it is best done; and suggesting also the ways in which I believe that we have particularly profited. I would like to stress that in doing this I am talking about things which are almost total unknowns to me, so that I wish to make my points in a very tentative way. Firstly, the Bible itself is an unknown; after one or even two or three readings of a book or parts of a

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book of that length, how much does one know or remember, even if it were an ordinary book? We have never studied it in any scholarly way. And then it is not an ordinary book, it contains God's revelation to men; to all sorts of men of every tongue, and race, and way of thought, to all the generations between us and our Lord, and to all those hundreds or thousands perhaps of generations to come; indeed the full potentialities of meaning even of any part is surely beyond the grasp of any one man at a particular time. One has only to start to read, say, the *Moralia* of St Gregory to realize how utterly different, indeed undreamt of, may be the approach of another generation. One hopes to find whatever is accessible to us, the revelation of the Holy Spirit to our generation or temperament. So that in this sense I see Bible reading as an exploration into the unknown. The second unknown about which I have to talk is myself, and even more unknown, my children. How can one tell which are the words or stories or visions which have altered one's mind, or disentangle the effects of Bible reading from those of school teaching, the liturgy or familiar religious pictures? One can only guess, and that is all I hope to do.

When we started our reading we made three assumptions; they were I think made without reflection, but they still seem to me to be good, so it may be useful to give the reasons and ways in which I have found them right. We have always aimed at reading all the Bible, not specifically the whole Bible, but every sort of book, and in particular the Old as well as the New Testament; actually we have always read one of the Gospels between Christmas and Easter, and the other books rather unsystematically during the rest of the year. Secondly we have always read liturgically, if I do not misuse the word; I mean formally, with a prayer at the beginning and the end, and in common. Thirdly we have assumed that it should be a family affair.

To take the first assumption; I think we have all wanted to read the whole Bible because it is after all our inheritance, given to us by God. One naturally wants to know what is there. Children too have a great curiosity which is often underestimated; they want to know everything that is there, even lists of names and laws and measurements rather than to feel that things are being left out; at least that is my experience. Then they need the variety. The Gospels are direct and concentrated, the heart of the matter,

but we cannot stand too much direct reality. I do not think it would be very possible to read only the Gospels daily with children, so that the reading would be all the time alive to them. Whereas the rest of the Bible illuminates the Gospels from every side, enlarges the historic scale, repeats the message in a different way, so that coming back to the Gospel words and story one sees it anew. The references to the Old Testament by our Lord or St Paul have not only the meaning which can be explained by telling or looking up the story referred to, but are more alive and far more memorable if Sara and Agar and Isaac and Ismael, for instance, are real people, known in their context in the history of Israel. Or, if one starts with the first chapter of St Matthew, the list of names—Judas among the sons of Jacob, Obed begotten of Booz and Ruth, the unknown Jechonias begotten in the transmigration of Babylon—conjures up all those generations, some so grand and well-known, others obscure and presumably ordinary, and the Covenant, and the waiting, and the failures, and the promise; God's plan is evoked by the bare list. Or again the cry of St John the Baptist, 'Behold the Lamb of God', must, if you have read the other books, evoke the lamb of the Passover killed in Egypt, and eaten standing in haste, and also the Lamb of the Apocalypse who has power to break the seven seals of the book. Equally the New Testament references give significance to the Old Testament stories. I do not think that one needs necessarily to point these things out. That it seems to me is done best of all by the Liturgy, particularly the Holy Week Liturgy where the Old Testament people and incidents and symbols are recalled and enlightened over and over again. Taking part in the Holy Week rites is I feel almost part of Bible reading. Then in detail, and throughout the year in the Mass, in the vision of Isaias, the remembrance of offerings of Abel, Abraham and Melchisedech, the Bible is drawn into the action which is the present, immediate centre of our religious life. All those other sacrifices of Noe, and Gideon, and Elias, and the elaborate descriptions of ritual illumine and are illuminated by the sacrifice of the Mass. That seems to me to make the difference between a Catholic and non-Catholic reading of the Bible: through the Mass Bible-reading becomes connected with life, present, personal action, God's and our own.

Turning to our second assumption, the advantage of a liturgical reading is that it differentiates it from other reading in a formal

way, recalling that it is God's book by asking his blessing. Because it is explicit one avoids the sort of reverence which is artificial and sentimental, which can divorce religion from life, any feeling of a need for a 'Bible voice'. The advantage of family reading is rather the same. The family, unlike the school, is a real and continuing unit, the background of real life, and one which is not grown out of, since children start to found new families almost as soon as they have grown out of those into which they were born. The characteristic of family reading to my mind is that it is something common and equally shared, not a teaching by anyone except the book. We all share in the reading aloud and in choosing the next book to read and the reading is, with the common meal, the focus of daily family life. A final very obvious point: one can read aloud, in daily chapters, books, such as the Wisdom books, which require surely very great perseverance to read to oneself. It is much easier too to maintain a practice if it is shared.

But one also runs into difficulties. It seems to me now that my children are older, some of them grown up, that it was all very simple when they were young. Then the difficulties were mainly physical; to find the time between bed-times and cooking the dinner to gather them all together and keep the baby reasonably still. They were interested by everything, they liked the repetition and the names and the detail and the exploration, they were prepared to go through many of the books that are often thought most difficult to read, Leviticus and Paralipomenon and the Apocalypse. They listened and questioned and remembered in part; but as they grow up they also want to understand. That means of course that they want to read different books. Curiosity has been satisfied. They know, more or less, what the whole thing is about. Now we are apt not to listen to difficult parts. One is up against a question of selection. And here I would like to ask a series of questions to which I do not know the answer. Would it be good to read passages only, from the prophets? We read Ezechiel the other day and I wondered if we would have profited more from parts only. We did try once reading the Breviary lessons from Isaias in Advent; they were much shorter than what we normally read and longer passages would have interested everyone more, I think. We have not tried any other selection. Certainly it is something that one cannot make oneself;

I would say too that one planned for a single year would not give one enough of the Bible. And I would like always to have read and re-read the whole book. Then one wonders whether it would not be good to read bits of both Testaments together sometimes; some of the passages which the Church has associated together, the association of which is so rich and illuminating, backwards and forwards, in so many ways, but which in the ordinary way the laity scarcely hears. One is aware of the association of the Song of Songs and Ecclesiasticus and Proverbs with our Lady, in the Liturgy of the Masses of her feasts, but not for instance of the passage in Isaias which is such a wonderful commentary on the Ascension 'who is this that cometh from Edom, with dyed garments from Bosra, this beautiful one with his robe, walking in the greatness of his strength? I that speak justice and am a defender to save. Why then is thy apparel red, and thy garments like theirs that tread in the winepress? I have trodden the winepress alone'. Or again that extension, intensification as it were, of the vision of our Lord at the Transfiguration with his face shining as the sun and his garments white as snow, which is created by recalling the Apocalypse, how the angel took St John up in spirit to a great and high mountain; and showed him the holy city of Jerusalem, which had no need of the sun because 'the Lamb is the light thereof'. The Church has her inspired usage of the Bible; one would like to know it better and know how to show it to one's children.

Then again as a family grows older there arises the question of a commentary. On the one hand children (and oneself) may want to know all sorts of questions of fact, according to their bent of mind; on the other hand they may need some sort of commentary that will open their eyes. Often enough we find ourselves reading chapters out of which some of us are consciously getting very little; though I feel that here is something of which one can never be sure. In this question of a commentary there is one point on which I am quite clear; it is not the parent's job to provide it. He is no more competent to do so than he is to make selections and the danger of falling into error is obvious. Moreover, it seems to me most important that Bible reading should not in any way be a lesson, but as I stressed before, a common experience and exploration. We have found the new *Catholic Commentary* very useful for understanding the text and for historical questions;

a good many other questions are perhaps as well left unanswered. I feel myself that the Epistles should be studied and that this could and I expect very often is very well done at school. But there remains the need for the other sort of eye-opening commentary which today I believe needs to be one which will give one something of the Church's symbolic interpretations of the scriptures. What we would like is something from the Fathers. In this what I am asking for is perhaps just some form of the Matins of the Breviary in English. Certainly there is one other difficulty that I have that perhaps this would solve. We have never read the psalms. That is my fault; the children have asked for them but I have felt that to read them straight through was not the right way to read them and yet I have known no other way. Again, one would like to get to know and participate in the Church's use of the Psalter.<sup>1</sup> I do not wish to suggest by all this that the straightforward reading of the Bible is not both possible and increasingly enriching throughout family life; only that it could perhaps be even further enriched.

There is a final very practical point that I should like to raise here. When children are young they are normally at home or together and live a more or less self-contained life. As they are older some go out or go away and friends and acquaintances come to stay or to meals. We usually have our reading directly after dinner (before homework-finishing and washing-up). It has never been decided what proportion of the family constitutes a quorum, nor on what principle our guests come in for reading or it gets put off for that night, most often the latter. One would like to rely in these matters on some sort of common custom, instead of depending on one's individual discretion or organization or cowardice.

Finally I come to the most hazardous part of my paper: the attempt to estimate what sort of difference the Bible has made to us. One thing is certain; its influence has been very diverse, varying according to the temperament of each member of the family. They like different books, remember different passages and characters, interpret what they have liked and learnt in different ways. I tried recently to find out what each felt he had learnt about the fundamental theme of the Bible, the idea of God.

1 It was suggested at the Conference that a psalm, taken from one of the offices for the day, might be substituted for a prayer at the beginning or end of the reading.

One said God is a voice, another God is silent (very much in accordance with their own propensities); the immediate thought of the first was of the revelation on Mount Sinai, the cloud on the mountain, the noise of the trumpet, louder and louder, the people waiting round, and Moses when he came out of the thick cloud, where God was, having his face so shining from the reflection of God's glory that no one dared approach him, and he had to veil it. To the other the incidents which came first to mind were all manifestations of God's power: the Flood, and the resurrection of the dry bones in Ezechiel, the stories of Ananias and Saphira, and of the Conversion of St Paul in the Acts. To another it was the visions of God in heaven in the prophets, and particularly in the Apocalypse, which seemed above all to illuminate his idea, but he stressed the many-sidedness of the biblical impressions. Another was pre-eminently aware of the Bible as the progressive revelation of God. They told me that it cut out the anthropomorphic idea of God—the Michelangelo-Blake idea of the bearded superman which it is so difficult to avoid. I would say that we have got a tremendous, and surely ineradicable, impression of the power and immediacy of God, of otherness and the wonder, which that arouses; of the immense bulk and scale of the idea of him. In fact the visions and the messages and the actions recorded by and among all those very human biblical people brings to life—or rather keeps alive and nourishes—one's *imaginative* comprehension of religious truth; an immensely important side of our minds which catechetical teaching cannot touch.

A second fundamental theme is the working of God in history (a particularly important theme since our educational bias is to see everything historically). The children tell me that the Bible has impressed upon them the sense that God has planned history from the beginning. We have read Genesis more often than any other book, but throughout the historical books of course one follows the plan, and God's amazing patience with the endless defections of his chosen people, until finally in the Apocalypse one sees a glimpse surely of history as it is seen from heaven, with our Lord as the great protagonist. As the youngest child said, the Bible teaches you that story books are right to have a happy ending—perhaps a disconcerting sidelight on the pessimism which seems to be normal in her generation.



Finally they told me that the Bible gives a radical view of life. One disagreed with this, but even he agreed that it impresses an awareness of the devil and of Hell—and on this it was of course the New Testament and our Lord's words which they quoted to me. They defined a radical view as a sense of the gulf between good and evil, that there is no in-between of the choice between being marked by the cross, or by the sign of the Beast. I would stress that these remarks are not thought out or balanced judgments—merely what was uppermost in the mind at the moment.

The Editor, when he asked me to write this article, asked me whether I found that the Bible gave the young an apprehension of the meaning of sin and the redemption. I would say that it seems to me to inculcate a sense of sin as defined in the previous paragraph, but not any sense of personal sin or guilt. It seems to me to enrich enormously an understanding of the redemption which has its normal focus in the Mass and in the Holy Week re-enactment.



## THE LAITY AND THE BREVIARY<sup>1</sup>

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**R**EADERS of Sir Walter Scott's *Lay of the Last Minstrel* may perhaps recall the Dwarf in the poem, and 'how much he marvelled' to find that the wounded opponent of Lord Cranstoun,

'... a knight of pride

Like a book-bosomed priest should ride.'

And the context reveals that he

'thought not to search or staunch the wound

Until the secret he had found.'<sup>2</sup>

Ignoring the fact that 'the mighty book' in this instance was none other than a magic book of spells by Sir Walter's medieval namesake Michael, and attending to the simile alone, we learn from the poet's own explanatory but confusing note, that 'The *book-a-bosom* priests were those who went to a distance to baptize

<sup>1</sup> A Paper read at THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT Conference, September 1957.

<sup>2</sup> *Canto* III, viii.