

‘The Bible is not just for the specialists’

Fr Timothy Radcliffe speaks ahead of the Word of the Lord Conference



Fr Radcliffe (centre): ‘In a very busy world you really need to give the Bible time. If it’s a word of friendship, you have to give time to your friends’ (Photo: Mazur/catholicchurch.org.uk)

The historic Catholic venue of Ushaw College near Durham will later this month host “Word of the Lord”, the first conference of its kind in a generation to celebrate the gift of the scriptures at the heart of the Church in England and Wales. It’s part of a multi-faceted initiative of the English and Welsh bishops’ department for evangelisation and catechesis to promote the Bible in Catholic life. Fr Timothy Radcliffe OP, former Master of the Order of Preachers, well-known author and international speaker, will deliver the keynote speech. Recently returned from one of his many speaking engagements, He spoke to Clare Ward about why he considers the conference to be such an important event in the life of the Church.

Why do you think the conference is such an important initiative?

The focus of the conference is at the heart of our life as a Church. It’s interesting that the Second Vatican Council called bishops “servants of the Word”. For every Catholic, our life is focused on receiving the gift of the Word. When you are following the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), at one point you are given the Scripture as a gift, and it’s something that gathers us into community with each other. In Luke’s Gospel Jesus says that “whoever hears my Word and does it is my brother and sister”. The Word of God brings unity in the Church as brothers and sisters.

Why did you prioritise coming to speak at the conference in Durham?

For about 14 years I taught Scripture at Blackfriars in Oxford and it was the most wonderful thing that happened to me. I had not been specially trained in the Scriptures and was rather nervous, but it was a gift to be asked to teach about it. I always find the scriptures fresh and exciting, and so the moment I was invited to talk about it I jumped at the chance.

How do you think the profile of Catholic Scripture study and pastoral reading of the Bible has changed since Vatican II?

I suspect that one of the ways that we've seen a positive shift is in the increasing popularity of Lectio Divina. There are now so many books on it. It's a wonderful way of praying with the scriptures which encourages us to listen, not to get information about God but, as the Vatican II document Dei Verbum teaches, it's a way in which we can be "addressed by God". We listen to Scripture as a Word of God addressed to his friends. This is a different way of listening to Scripture, rather than as an ordinary non-spiritual text. In the Church for the last 50 years, there has been a big stress on Word of God as a word of friendship, and it's a transforming word. Pope Benedict XVI, in his beautiful exhortation Verbum Domini, stresses how revelation is dialogical, it involves entry into conversation with God and that emphasis is a fruit of the Second Vatican Council in this post-conciliar period.

Scripture is not just for "specialists" but is a gift for everyone. We have to help everyone to discover how to listen and that's a big part of the focus of the forthcoming conference at Ushaw. We read a manual to work out how to use a central heating system in one way and we read a novel in another way. We also have to help people learn how to listen to Scripture. Many people still worry about whether they have to believe every part of the scriptures literally or not and Vatican II is helpful here. It affirmed that Scripture is not a scientific document or a historical document at every point, but it's a saving Word. This has great significance for evangelisation. What we read in the Scriptures is Good News and that is what we're invited to present to everyone.

How significant is it to have a Scripture conference during the Year of Faith?

It's interesting that in the Bible the human vocation is always sourced in God's call to us all by name. He calls Abraham and summons him out to the Promised Land, and the minute he hears God's call he says: "Here I am." I think faith is always hearing the Word of God addressed to us, to which we respond. Isaiah says: "Here I am, send me." Faith is essentially that response. The most important way we are addressed by God is in the Bible. We listen in the silence of our hearts, to anyone who speaks truthfully and through the example of the saints. There are all sorts of ways that God addresses us but they all derive from the Word – Jesus. That is why it's so important to have a focus on Scripture during the Year of Faith.

You've travelled the world to preach. What new ways have you observed that Catholics are engaging with the scriptures?

In Latin America there are hundreds of thousands of small communities who meet to ponder the scriptures during the week. That's been a wonderful experience. I think in recent years we are becoming much more aware of the Bible's literary and poetic character. Of course, the beauty of the psalms must be highlighted. We've begun to discover how each Gospel has its own particular narrative. So we are learning to savour the differences between the gospels.

In what ways do you think we can use the Bible more effectively in service of the Church's mission?

People can be taught to enjoy the Bible as children. There are wonderful stories in the Bible. The whole drama of the story of Jesus's life, death and Resurrection. Even today people risk their life for that Word. It's really helpful if people see there are all sorts of witnesses to God's Word around the world today who are trying to live the Word, even though it might cost them their life.

What do you think are the challenges to the biblical apostolate?

In a very busy world you really need to give the Bible time. If it's a word of friendship, you have to give time to your friends. In a hectic society it's difficult for people to be with the Word of God and sit with it, listen to it.

This article first appeared in the print edition of The Catholic Herald dated 12/4/13

Catholic Herald - Clare Ward