

# The Incarnation of the Word in words

by John Huntriss

*Author's note: After I spoke in November 2013 to the North Gloucestershire Circle about the Vatican II document Dei Verbum I was asked if I would submit a written version for publication. My response was that I would rather concentrate on just one point from that fine document: it is found in Chapter III, encapsulated in the words that "in Sacred Scripture God speaks through men in human fashion".*

*It was Pius XII who first taught me to connect the inspiration of Scripture with the Incarnation (in Divino Afflante Spiritu, 1943). Benedict XVI (Verbum Domini, 2010) traces this teaching as far back as St Ambrose in the fourth century. It is explored in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and I think it is particularly clear in Part Two of The Gift of Scripture, the teaching document published by our bishops in 2005 (CTS).*

In the Divine Praises we say: "Blessed be Jesus Christ, True God and True Man". This crisply and memorably states our belief. Jesus Christ is not part God and part Man, or sometimes God and sometimes Man. He is True God from before eternity; and True Man from the moment of his conception. We know that is so whether we think we understand it or not.

In the body of human flesh which he took from Mary he ascended into heaven; but he is still with us in ways that we can touch and hear and see with our physical senses (cf the beginning of I John): he is physically present with us in the sacraments, in the Church, in my neighbour... These may be seen as extensions of the Incarnation. Scripture, too, should be seen through the lens of the Incarnation. John Paul II said that the writing of the words of God "was the first step towards the Incarnation of the Word of God".

Jesus Christ is not partly or sometimes God and partly or sometimes Man, but he is True God and True Man. Likewise, Scripture is not partly or sometimes the Word of God and partly or sometimes the words of Man: it is the Word of God incarnate in human words, wholly the Word of God and wholly human words. This, too, is true whether we understand it or not.

## **Speaking through events**

There seems to be a parallel with the way that God is understood to speak through events. At the beginning of II Kings 17 we read how Hoshea, king in Samaria of the northern tribes of Israel, was a vassal of King Shalmaneser of Assyria and paid him tribute, but then he tried to get better terms from the other great power, Egypt. This unsurprisingly provoked Shalmaneser who invaded and crushed Hoshea and his kingdom. So verses 1-6 have told us plainly why the catastrophe of 721 BC happened; only for verse 7 to say we are now to be told why it happened! Here history and politics are not mentioned: the reason was that God's people had sinned against him. We are given two quite different reasons, historical and theological, of man and God; but we are not to choose between them for both are valid. What happened is authentic human history – the exercise of free will by fallen men; and at the same time God is speaking through these events.

Again, at the beginning of Luke 13 Jesus is asked about two recent catastrophes: were

the victims greater sinners than others who were not killed? "No," says Jesus, "but all of you take these events as a call to repent." So, presumably, Pilate behaved brutally because, as we know, he could be a brute; and the tower fell because it was poorly built or maintained. These were authentically human events and the question to ask is not "What was God doing?" but "What might God be saying through what happened?" We might ask "Why our economic woes of recent years?" Did God (as it were) write the whole script? No: he has given us free will and this has been authentic human history, a tale, perhaps, of greed, of incompetence. But then we do well if we go on to ask "What might God be saying to us through these events?"

Jesus Christ is True God and True Man. Heresy comes in when either of these is undermined. Scripture is the Word of God and human words. Again, errors come in when either is understated. Liberals may become uncomfortable when we say that Jesus of Nazareth is not merely a good man but God; and that Scripture is not merely human words but the Word of God. Fundamentalists proclaim that Scripture is the Word of God but are distinctly uncomfortable when we say it is also human words. Either they may be radical protestants who believe that the Fall corrupted us not just beyond the point that we could save ourselves but totally, so that there is nothing good left in us. The idea of a human contribution to Scripture is therefore very suspect to such people. Or else they may have a sort of misplaced over-piety like that of people who are uneasy with Jesus's humanity. ("Do you think Jesus grew over the years in his understanding of who he was?" we ask. "No, he is God so he always knew everything." "Everything? Was he born already knowing how to walk, and talk, and feed himself?" "Well, learning things like that is part of being human." QED! You have to be firm but gentle with such people.)

### **Instruments of the Holy Spirit**

Pius XII describes the human authors as instruments of the Holy Spirit, but *living* instruments with the use of reason. To get the full meaning of a passage of Scripture we have to consider the character of the writer and his audience, the context, circumstances, and cultural background, the literacy and linguistic conventions and so on.

If you wish to know what the Old Testament prophets were about you must study the historical background and the conventions of prophecy; the Pontifical Biblical Commission says it is wrong to see such prophecies as "photographic anticipations of future events". So when Isaiah wrote of the sufferings of the "servant of God" which God would use for the salvation of others it is true, to a greater or lesser extent, of all who serve God. We do not have to suppose that the Holy Spirit revealed to him all the events of Holy Week. But when Holy Week came, more than five centuries later, it was seen that he had been enabled to speak more truly than he himself knew.

It is because Scripture is human words as well as the Word of God that we have to keep asking ourselves: "What kind of writing is this?" Do it more or less subconsciously, as you do many times a day with human words, whether written or spoken, as you have done from early childhood. When the Psalmist speaks of hills skipping like lambs recognise it as poetic language just as you do when it is not between covers marked HOLY BIBLE. It is the error of fundamentalism to say that because this is the Word of God it must be literally true. It is the Word of God, but

incarnate in human words – and human words are used in many different ways. Insist on this: we are not wriggling but interpreting human words as we always do. We are not being dishonest if we refuse to defend as literally true the story of two nudists in a garden having a conversation with a snake; we may say, rather, that this is colourful and folksy fiction, used as the vehicle to convey some important truths about how our first parents' total loyalty to God began to be prised apart; and that mistrust and envy were among the first seeds of sin. Fiction is not lying for there is no intention to deceive. But good fiction is a mirror held up to life.

### **Science and scripture**

One can see why an earlier generation was so concerned when it looked as though we had to choose between science and scripture: was the world made – or not – in six days? The concern is: once you admit that one thing is not literally true where does the rot stop? Where does the garment stop unravelling? If the Creation story is not literally true can I believe in the Resurrection? Pius XII pointed the way to answering this concern: the Word of God is given in human words and we must distinguish the ways in which these words, being human, are used. The opening chapters of Genesis are of one genre, the later chapters of another; then we have law, folklore, history, poetry, prophecy, wisdom writing, Gospels, letters and so on. And when you move from one genre to another that is where the garment stops unravelling: *this* is literally true, *that* was never meant to be.

As I said, I find this teaching most illuminating with its various implications. Benedict XVI shows that it was already at least sixteen centuries old when Pius XII wrote. Historians may tell me I am wrong but I have the impression that Pius blew a lot of dust off it and made us think again about what it means: that the Church has been thinking more boldly about Scripture as human words while keeping a firm hold on the equal truth that it is the Word of God. There is no new teaching then, but there is an element of rediscovery.

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