

PART TWO:
THE WORD

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Chapter xiii:

What the Bible isn't

WE'VE NOW REACHED THE POINT in our devotional study of the Mass when the action turns away from the altar for the first and last time.

The celebrant has just finished the Collect of the day, and at once there is change. Everyone in the nave sits down; after the dramatic climax of the first third of Mass, tension slackens. The celebrant and his sacred ministers turn (spinning with the tabernacle as their focus, as if they were planets circling a sun). They turn for a while away from the altar, gazing west. They are gazing at a member of the congregation who has risen from her pew, genuflected, and been met by the Master of Ceremonies, who has courteously walked out of the sanctuary to meet her. The M.C. leads the reader to the bronze eagle, upon which an enormous book lies open, and points out a few paragraphs. The reader obediently begins to recite words mysterious, stirring, poetic and stately, evidently ancient verses, invoking (of all things) laundries and metallurgy: *et sedebit conflans et emundans argentums*

*Who may abide the day of his coming?
 and who shall stand when he appeareth?
 for he is like a refiner's fire,
 and like fullers' soap:
 And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver:
 and he shall purify the sons of Levi,
 and purge them as gold and silver.¹*

We have reached the part of Mass called the ministry of the Word: we are attending, now and for some time to come, to the Bible.

¹ From the Lesson for Candlemas: Malachi iii^{2f}.

So what is the Bible?

THE QUICK ANSWER is that the Bible is a huge selection of books selected by the Christian Church, and before that by the religious nation called Israel, for use in ritual worship.

There's a lot more to be said – indeed, a good proportion of all the books that have been written and printed in every Western language are about what the Bible is and what we ought to do with it. But the most important thing is not to lose sight of the ritual purpose of assembling this anthology in the first place.

The enormous number of separate documents that have been gathered into the Bible – census returns and historical monographs and mythological story-books and committee minutes and love poetry and bishops' circulars and genealogical lists and military annals and novels and liturgical manuals, and a good deal more – were written with every motive that has ever driven men to put pen to paper (or quill to parchment, or stylus to clay tablet: a few of these writings are almost scarily old). The men who composed these texts – and the men who modified, combined, fabricated, manipulated and edited them – were of every type: heroes and saints and wretches, monotheists, polytheists, atheists, and jolly worldlings who didn't care. Sometimes they probably thought they were addressing all mankind on behalf of the One eternal Mind Who lies behind the universe. Sometimes they were scribbling down notes to a friend – *pænulam quam reliqui Troade apud Carpum veniens, When you come here make sure you don't forget to bring the overcoat I stupidly left behind with Carpus, bless him.*²

Quite often these writers were attacking and contradicting each other. There is no one unifying idea behind these writings, they do not emerge from one single age or nation or religion, they have no constant tone or form, no constant theological or moral position. The Bible is not, in appearance, a single *entity* at all. Indeed it's a slightly annoying corruption of English (as of, I think, every modern European language) that *Bible* is a singular noun. It ought to be a plural, for it derives from *biblia*, which means *books*, and that's the way to think of 'it', or, rather, *them*: the Bible is a vast and almost violently varied selection of writings.

We are listening at this moment in our frozen-framed Mass to the recitation of the Tudor English translation of a particularly enigmatic text

² II Timothy iv¹³.

called The Book of Malachi, around twenty-four centuries old. By sitting and listening we're doing something unlike anything we've done before in the rites of the Mass. Everyone is looking away from the altar where the sacrament is worked, and quietly attending to literature, to mere words. More and more words are about to proceed forth: three distinct readings – [Lesson](#), [Epistle](#), [Gospel](#) – of rising intensity, broken up by increasingly urgent song. For after the very quiet beginning of the Lesson, the ceremonial of reading is going to become richer and more emphatic (indeed today the Gospel will be given the ultimate honour of being hailed by burning lights held by everyone in the church). Nonetheless, despite these embellishments, words – words rather than gestures or things – are our focus now, and for the next three chapters. It's quite a change from last week.

I'll get to this *crescendo* of ceremonial and music in the second half of this chapter. What we need to ponder today how this portion of the Mass works, and how surprising it is, and how lovely. We also have to ponder what is *not* being done, for an atrocious misunderstanding is abroad about the Bible, what it is for, and what it does: a misunderstanding which afflicts almost everyone who doesn't come to Mass and see the Bible actually at work.

Seeing through this misunderstanding is so important I'm about to indulge myself very considerably.

A fantasy.

IF YOU WERE ESCAPING FROM EARTH as alien spacecraft destroyed it with sizzling Death Rays, but had time to rush into a well-stocked library and cram a suitcase before you fled on an escape-pod with your delightful spouse, to found a new race of men on a distant and verdant planet – and who knows, this may happen – your descendents would probably develop in time a religion which revered the contents of your suitcase: *David Copperfield*, a few clippings from Friday's *Washington Post*, three long dull poems by Longfellow; minutes of the last meeting of the vestry of Ascension and St Agnes, a decree issued by President Taft and another one issued by Napoleon (but alas! these two names have been accidentally swapped over), two sermons by Fr Davenport – one with the first page missing; selections from the *Iliad* (in Greek), *War and Peace* (in Russian), and *Fleurs des Mals* (in French), part of the shooting-script of Ken Burns'

Civil War documentaries, next week's chapter of *The Freeze-Frame Mass*, George Washington's Farewell Address, two academic theological articles, hygiene legislation passed in the Commonwealth of Kentucky during 1940, a summary of Christian doctrine composed for use in primary schools; many court records, volume I of the Penguin *History of Canada*, a cruel witty essay by Gore Vidal about Miss Lewinsky, an insane article by Rush Limbaugh about the Kosovo war, census returns of Tangier Island (doctored to disguise a pattern of incest in the Crockett clan), a furious exchange of writs and attorneys' letters about the use of incense at Nashville Cathedral in the 1890s, and a beautiful letter from Emily T. Jameson, aged 14, of Rock Island, Illinois, declaring her romantic attachment to a certain Brad, aged 15 and a quarter.

The strange thing is that the religion your descendants develop will be rational, decent and noble. They will be Christians. At their solemn services they will read aloud from the sacred library they have inherited from you, reciting certain set passages (called lections, from *lectio*, I read) which are cleverly selected to make sense of the ritual occasion. At funerals the lector, the designated reader, will recite or chant the lines from Homer in which Hector dies (Hector, they realise, is a prophetic image of Christ), at weddings a well-translated portion of Emily Jameson's love-letter (so suggestive of the love of God for mankind), and when at war with beastly extraterrestrials, the famous passage where St Gore Vidal denounces harlotry (clearly an image for the imperial tyranny of the Klingons).

Your descendants are not fools. Their scholars know that these writings have extremely diverse origins, and might have meant something quite different when – long ago, in a distant place – they were first composed. Sometimes it will be possible to guess at these origins: to deduce that Taft and Napoleon were different people, to detect the fictional nature of David Copperfield, to speculate about the *rôle* of Monica Lewinsky, to acknowledge squalid sentiment in that *Washington Post* editorial. But such learning doesn't trouble worshippers. These texts are sacred because they are used in sacred worship. The Church of your descendants knows how to use them – how to employ them in worshipping and in striving to understand the One God. No one will try to obey the letter of Kentuckian law about chicken-coop standards, nor model his behaviour on the more savage deeds of Hiawatha. Everyone will try to be inspired by the nobility of Washington's speech, without quite knowing what it's about. Anyone with religious sense will be illuminated by the Davenportian preaching. But your remote descendents won't need to know who Hiawatha, Fr Davenport

and Washington were. That's not the point. The Writings matter because of what they are used for.

The bore of Biblical Fundamentalism.

I'VE INDULGED MY FANTASY at such length because of a certain perverted idea that began to appear at the end of the Middle Ages, which became prevalent at the Reformation, and which still infests people's minds, especially in America. This error, or lunacy, is known as Biblical Fundamentalism, or, more quaintly, as solascripturism (from the slogan *sola scriptura*: The Bible Alone). It is the idea that the Bible is a single long statement dictated by God to human secretaries, who flawlessly copied it all down; that it is a simple, easily-understood historical, theological and moral manifesto of what God has done and proposes to do, and what He demands of us; that anyone who sits quietly and reads from it (in a translation, or loose paraphrase) will discover all he needs to know and all that can be known about God, and thus become a Christian and be saved.

If you'd presented such an idea to St Paul, St Augustine or St Francis they'd have (according to mood) laughed, or howled and flailed about shouting Heresy! Gnosticism! Idolatry! Indeed, Paul did bump up against Christians who fell into a much milder version of this error about the Book of Deuteronomy, and he thundered at them that he was *a minister of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life* (. . . *novi testamenti non litteræ sed Spiritus littera enim occidit Spiritus autem vivificat*).³ God the Spirit is alive in the Church, the one, continuous, living, organic Body of Christ. To turn your back on the Body of Christ and try to make do with the Bible alone is insane. It is as sensible as stealing a thurible from a sacristy, taking it home, setting it on a coffee table, then staring and staring at the purloined thurible until your mind is illuminated. Of course your mind will not be illuminated: it'll empty out, and what fills it is whatever rubbish your heretical ministers choose to pour in.

If you do flee to a distant planet with a suitcase of classic literature, perhaps some befuddled descendant of ours will turn fundamentalist, and pretend to find a total rule for living in the perusal of the Penguin History of Canada. Such a heresy will not last: it is too inane. But perhaps for centuries afterward a sensible believer might feel a bit uncomfortable when they hear

³ II Corinthians iii⁶.

a passage read in church. *Oh dear, she'll muse, aren't we supposed to believe this account of the fall of Quebec was written by God? It seems very surprising; I hope I'm not being disloyal* And a certain mental discomfort will darken her mind.

This discomfort will be misplaced. Next week, as we move through the various movements and progressions of the ministry of the Word, we'll consider the ancient Catholic doctrine of what the Bible is and how it works. No superstition or suspension of critical thought is needed: for the sacredness of the Bible is not a trick, and the ceremonies with which we read it point to how it should be read.