

“The Word of God is alive and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword”. The Apostle Paul is usually depicted with a sword, and a mighty sword, the sort that could slice a man in half. It is this line, evoking that image, which, I think, caused the attribution of the (so-called ) 'Letter to the Hebrews' to Paul. As we noted last week this is not in fact the case, but the image is powerful. A double-edged sword is a terrifying weapon. Any impact would do a great deal of harm. But this sword can not only do serious damage but it can cut finely into impossibly small gaps. It is both scimitar and rapier. It can swipe off limbs and slice with surgical precision. It is not to be messed with.

The Word of God, like God, is both terrifying and reassuring. The mighty sword can defend as well as attack. It is mighty and also delicate; fearsome and subtle.

I have spent a considerable part of my life reading and reflecting on God's Word; and preaching and explicating God's Word. At present I am traversing the diocese speaking in each deanery about God's real presence in Word and in Eucharist to readers, Extraordinary ministers and catechists, as some of you have recently experienced. I am wanting to show how the Word of God is true, and alive and active, relevant to our situation in our messy and muddled world.

Let me for a moment reflect with you on the first of these attributes of God's Word – its truth.

I am wholly convinced that the Word of God, given to us in the Sacred Scriptures, the Bible, Old Testament and New, is true. Profoundly true. And I affirm that in the knowledge that in the Bible there are errors, contradictions and inconsistencies and all that goes with a human production, composed and compiled over many centuries, with limited information available, and transmitted by frail and mistake-prone scribes. God works with us in our limitations and deficiencies. Then Holy Spirit was ever at work, guiding the process, for it is truly inspired, but the Holy Spirit is not to be thought of as a dove whispering into the ear of a pen-poised evangelist or prophet. God's inspiration does not remove our human capacity but works with it. That image may preserve the divine character of the Word, but it would need to be supplemented by showing a page festooned with blots and crossings out to show the equally important human dimension of the Word. Just as Jesus is true God and true man, so the Sacred Word is wholly divine and wholly human.

Only in a courtroom or in a laboratory do we hope to find truth 'beyond reasonable doubt'; and even so, that 'truth' is challenged by appeal or repeated experimentation, with further judgement by higher judges or peer scrutiny. Our world is more messy

than law court or laboratory and divine truth is revealed to us in less forensic ways.

Let me illustrate: Jesus' farewell meal with his disciples, the Last Supper, was it a Passover Meal?

Read Mark, Matthew and Luke and it was. Reference is made to the preparation of the room for a Passover Meal. However, the references are slight. If they were omitted no one would notice; and the nature of the meal seems forgotten as the story is told. A lot happens that appears incongruous on a Passover night. Now look at the fourth Gospel. Jesus is condemned by Pilate at noon. The very time that the lambs are being slaughtered in the Temple in preparation for the meal to be eaten after nightfall. We heard John the Baptist announce Jesus to be 'The Lamb of God' at the outset of Jesus' ministry; now we see him as the sacrificial lamb whose death will affect salvation. But this means that when the meal is eaten Jesus is already dead and buried.

The Last Supper cannot have been a Passover meal and not a Passover meal. Scholarly opinion tends towards John giving the more accurate account, but does it matter. The meal was shared in a Passover context. Jesus is the one who gave himself to us in symbol at the meal and in reality on the cross and who continues to share his risen and glorified self with us today. That is the truth that each account is describing.

The Scriptures reveal to us “The truths necessary for our salvation” said the Council Fathers at Vatican II (*Dei Verbum, para 6*), and the sacred authors did so in the way they felt was appropriate, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, according to the limitations of their human knowledge.

The truth the Bible conveys can be understood only by appreciating the different types of writing that are found there. The Bible is a library. Only for a relatively short period of its existence has it been available to us between two covers. The Books of the Bible varying in the type of writing they contain. We find myth, legend, folk-tale, prophecy, poetry, law, historical narrative, epistle, apocalyptic and much more. Each requires to be read and understood in its own terms. Failure to do so leads us to making category mistakes as we would make if we read Beatrix Potter as if it were a text book about animal behaviour or watched Star Trek in the hope of gaining insight into astronomy.

The delightful little Book of Jonah is a parable, a witty story telling of God's compassion for all people, even though they be as proverbially wicked and wholly foreign as the inhabitants of Nineveh. If we think the story is, not a parable but a true historical account of the ministry of Jonah, then we search the seven seas for a creature which can consume a man whole, keep him alive for three days and three nights and vomit him onto the sea-shore. We also need to locate the ruins of a city so

large it would take three days to walk through it. (Ancient Rome can be crossed on foot in an afternoon, with plenty of time for coffee on the way!) Oh, we also have to believe that all the animals, cows and cats, were clothed in sackcloth and anointed with ashes, as well as the humans of the place.

Misread the type of literature and we end up with absurdity.

By the grace of God the Bible was compiled over thousands of years by many authors, compilers and editors, in ancient languages. To appreciate its complexities and nuances we need to be expert in ancient languages, customs and cultures, literature and archaeological discoveries and numerous areas of academic expertise. But, it is the Word of God, available to any of us who are willing to give the time to its prayerful reading. That is the insignificant price we pay for hearing God's Word speak to us today, and cut through the messiness of a fractured and incomprehensible world. God's Word cuts to the heart for it is sharper than any two edged sword.