

The Bedell / Boyle Lecture 1991

# Alive and Active

*Dei Verbum* and Ireland Today

Most Revd Donal Murray

## Response

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## Introduction

The National Bible Society of Ireland has inaugurated an annual lecture series known as the Bedell/Boyle Lecture. It is intended that the series will provide an opportunity to promote the Bible and the effective use of the Holy Scriptures. Each year a speaker of stature will be asked to lecture on a topic relating some aspect of the Bible to current developments. It is hoped to publish each lecture.

The Lecture series is named in honour of William Bedell (1571-1642) Bishop of Kilmore and Ardagh, because of his commitment to the translation of the Bible into Irish. Linked with Bedell's Irish Bible, published for the first time in 1685 is Hon. Robert Boyle (1626-1691) who ensured the publication of Bedell's Bible. Boyle was very committed to Bible distribution and he was a distinguished scientist known for Boyle's Law. Thus key elements of modern Bible Society work - translation, publication and distribution - were foreshadowed by these two men.

The Society was honoured that the series was inaugurated by The Most Rev. Donal Murray, D.D., on 8 February 1991 in the Royal Irish Academy. We acknowledge the kind support our close and historic neighbour, the Royal Irish Academy, extended to us on that occasion. The Response to the Lecture was given by the late Right Rev. George Otto Simms, D.D., Honorary Life Member of the National Bible Society. We are indeed privileged to have heard his contribution and to publish it here. We remain very conscious of our deep loss with the death of Dr Simms late in 1991.

We must finally record our best thanks to Rev. Bernard Treacy, O.P., and to Dominican Publications for kind help in the publication of this Lecture. Bishop Murray's Lecture has already appeared in a shortened version in *Doctrine and Life*, December 1991.

We hope that this publication will aid our reflection and response to the living and active Word of God.

Fergus O'Ferrall

# Alive and Active

## *Dei Verbum* and Ireland Today

+ DONAL MURRAY

When *Dei Verbum*, the Vatican II Constitution on Divine Revelation, was promulgated on 18 November 1965, less than half of the present population of Ireland had yet entered primary school. Some of us may be tempted to think of the Second Vatican Council as if it were a recent event – singing, like Maurice Chevalier, ‘Ah yes, I remember it well!’ For most people in Ireland it is history, another world.

For the young adults of today, there is little point in listing the great advances which the Council made on various issues, since the Council is not even a memory for them. For the rest of us, it is long past time to be basking in the light of the Council as if it had somehow completed the task of bringing the Gospel to the world of today. There is, for all of us, the duty of looking at our present circumstances to see what now needs to be said and done twenty-five years on so that we may hear, and proclaim, the Word of God as clearly as possible for our own day.

I do not, therefore, intend to try to trace the development which led to the formulation of the Constitution on Divine Revelation, nor to look in any detail at its implementation over the last twenty-five years. I intend, rather to look at our present situation, particularly in the light of the statement in chapter 6 of *Dei Verbum*.

Such is the force and power of the Word of God that it can serve the Church as her support and vigour, and the children of the Church as strength for their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life. Scripture verifies in the most perfect way the words: ‘The Word of God is living and active’ (Heb 4:12).

The Word of God is living and active, as it has always been, in ways which cannot be entirely pinned down in neat formulae. We can, nonetheless, look at some particular areas in which listening to the Word can be a source of vigour and nourishment. The necessity for listening to the Word of God is pressing today in ways that may not have been so evident twenty-five years ago.

*Dei Verbum* is written, as the opening paragraph states, because ‘[the Council] wants the whole world to hear the summons to salvation, so that through hearing it may believe, through belief it may hope, through hope it may come to love’ (DV X).

It should be noted that the Constitution is concerned with the subject of divine revelation. It is not dealing only with the written word of the Bible but with the entire self-communication of God in deeds and words. The opening phrase, ‘Word of God’, ‘designates the living Word of God as God continually communicates it to the Church and through the Church, to arouse faith and lead human beings in a life of communion with God and with each other’ (Pope John Paul, 14 December 1990).

Through this revelation God addresses human beings as friends and invites them into his own company (DV 2). In its treatment of revelation, the Constitution ‘places Sacred Scripture at the centre of its perspective’ (Pope John Paul, loc. cit.): ‘Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit’ (DV 9).

### Witness to the Transcendent

The first role of Sacred Scripture to which I want to refer, and which has particular urgency today, is as a witness to the transcendent. Our world is one which is characterised by a certain absence of the awareness of God. It is not so much a question of formal atheism; it is a matter rather of a style of life in which the question of God's existence does not even arise. It is a world whose meaning, goals

and destiny are merely those that we can imagine for ourselves. It is a world in which, at least in practice, humanity becomes its own God.

The perennial choice, the temptation of the third chapter of Genesis, faces us in a particularly sharp way. Do we want to be like God, do we wish to be the measure of good and evil?:

As soon as man began considering himself the source of the highest meaning in the world and the measure of everything, the world began to lose its human dimension, and man began to lose control of it (Havel, V., *Disturbing the Peace*).

The meaning of human life lies in something, or more properly Someone, beyond itself. That Someone is God, who reveals himself to the world. The world can only be properly understood by those who know their need of him:

Everyone can discover God's power and goodness in life whenever we trust him and earnestly seek to do his will. However, this demands of us humility and the consciousness that the human person is not the measure of all things. We must not see ourselves as the measuring rod of all thought, morality and justice. All too easily we succumb to the idea that everything can be made, heaven and earth, even mankind itself, according to our own image and likeness (Pope John Paul, 24 June 1990).

That is the first step in recognising the transcendent — to know that we are not the ultimate measure of reality. The greatness of biblical faith is that it goes much further. This faith is no mere product of the human mind: 'Before this faith can be exercised, a person must have the grace of God' (DV 5). It recognises that the Transcendent is not merely the vague horizon of our search for meaning, but has himself addressed us many times and in various ways until 'the Word of the eternal Father, took on himself the flesh of human weakness' (DV 13).

The Transcendent God is more than an answer to the questions of the human mind and heart. Rather, the human search for truth, beauty, justice and love is itself created by the God who reveals himself; his creative act brought that search into being; his redeeming love offers to that search goals which it has never entered into the human heart to conceive (1 Cor 2:9).

Now while this gift was an enormous and mysterious response to the question that the human being is, still it could not be reduced to this. Indeed any attempt to present Christianity exclusively as an answer to questions in the human heart would inevitably reduce it (Archbishop Desmond Connell, *The Idea of Theology according to John Henry Newman*, unpublished, 1990).

The Bible is a visible embodiment of the fundamental truth that our faith is no mere projection of human desires and hopes. It is a response to God who has first spoken to us, who has first loved us and who has invited us into his company.

The humility that is required of us in abandoning the pretension to be our own God is no humiliation. On the contrary, it makes it possible to accept the transforming, justifying, forgiving fulness of love out of which the infinite God addresses us as friends (DV 2). The Word of God reveals to us who we are. That is the importance of the Word of God in Ireland today, in the new world which is emerging in Europe and beyond, in the despair and helplessness which we feel in the face of poverty, violence and secularism; God's Word tells us who we are. It gives rise, in fact, to that 'deep amazement at human worth and dignity (which) is the Gospel' (Pope John Paul, *Redemptor Hominis* 10).

In the Catholic tradition, 'the living teaching office of the Church' has the task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God. It is, nevertheless, clear that: '... this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it' (DV 10).

Ours is a revealed religion. It is founded not on a search for a hidden and silent God but on acceptance of the God who makes himself known. The human quest for meaning cannot be satisfied by human resources; its boundaries cannot be limited to this world and to this life. God's Word, made flesh in Christ, fully reveals us to ourselves and makes our supreme calling clear (cf. Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* 22).

The first place, therefore, is held by God's Word; all else must be a response to that Word.

It follows that all the preaching of the Church, as indeed the entire Christian religion, should be nourished and ruled by sacred Scripture (*DV 21*).

The paradox which we face twenty-five years after the promulgation of *Dei Verbum* is that things are both much better and much worse than they were. The scriptures have become more familiar and more widely read in the Catholic Church. The work of the National Bible Society and similar organisations has made the Bible available to thousands of people all over the world. A large variety of translations is available to everybody. At the same time, the voice of God seems in many ways to be less audible. The sense of mystery appears to have become dulled. It does not automatically follow that people who read the Bible will hear the 'speech of God'.

The central challenge for us in this last decade of the second Christian millennium is to allow the scriptures to be read and heard for what they are, the voice of God who enlightens, judges, challenges, calls to repentance. It is a voice which deposes us from the foolish pretension to be the centre of our own world in order to invite us into the infinitely richer and more fulfilling world of God's peace.

The Constitution, in its closing paragraphs reminds all the Christian faithful that 'prayer should accompany the reading of sacred Scripture, so that a dialogue takes place between God and the human person' (*DV 25*).

The great advances in biblical scholarship in this century are something to be welcomed. It is important, however, that we do not do to the Bible what bad teaching sometimes did to Shakespeare — that is to analyse the words so completely that the meaning disappears from view!

Yves Congar, the great Dominican theologian says:

In the initial approach to the Bible with the aid of a grammar — I am not speaking disparagingly as it is most necessary and useful — the word of God confronted me as something external to myself ... . But when I approach the Bible with the inner resources of a profound Christian awareness, the word of God no longer confronts me as an object to be analysed and dissected. It is a living arrow that pierces my heart. It overthrows routine and persists in asking uncomfortable questions. It is a flame, a flame that consumes with an urgent living warmth (*The Revelation of God*, Darton, Longman and Todd 1968).

The great need that faces us is not simply to make people familiar with the Bible as a great work of literature, which it is. Our task is to help people to approach the Bible with the reverence and prayerfulness which will allow them to hear the voice of God who 'comes lovingly to meet his children and talks to them' (*DV 21*). The need which faces us, and in which a reverent approach to the Bible plays a vital part, is to proclaim who we human beings are — a people with whom God is in dialogue.

This is more difficult than it sounds. The Liturgy Constitution had already stated that it is Christ himself who speaks when the Scriptures are read in the Church (cf. Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 7). But people come into the Church out of a world where God seems not to appear above the horizon, a world which has almost silenced his voice. It may be more difficult than it was in the past for the those who are participating in the liturgy really to hear the word which God is addressing to them.

When people set out to read the Bible for themselves, they do so in a world where reading has been devalued. We skim through reports; we glance at newspapers; we engage in 'speed-reading'. We scan pages and quickly conclude that they contain either nothing of interest or nothing that we do not already know. We are not accustomed to reading in order to savour and reflect, in order to understand more deeply what we know and believe.

Discovering the power of God's word and receiving the strength which it can give to our faith demands of us, as Pope John put it, 'humility and the consciousness that the human person is not the measure of all things'. It demands, in other words, an attitude of reverence and of faith. We need to provide more and more settings, not just liturgical but small groups to reflect together and quiet places for prayer and

recollection. We need to help people to recover that humility and that consciousness of not being the measure of all things which is so eloquently expressed in some of our old Irish prayers:

Fírinne atá i do Shoiscéal, a Aon-Mhic Dé,  
Solas is teagasc is neart don tréith.  
Tabhair dúinn mar ghrásta go brách bheith umhal  
Do do thoil agus do do chuing, a Thiarna bhuain.

Truth is in your Gospel, only Son of God, Light and teaching and strength for the weak. Give us the gift of being forever humble before your will and your authority, eternal Lord.

## Witness to Continuity

The second important aspect of the written Word of God for us today is that it is a sign of the continuity of faith. The Scriptures, as *Dei Verbum* puts it, 'present God's own Word in an unalterable form, and they make the voice of the Holy Spirit sound again and again in the words of the prophets and apostles' (DV 21).

Our present culture is one which has difficulty not only in recognising the mystery of God but also in seeing itself as part of a history. The faith we profess has been believed and lived by many generations, but we are often insufficiently ready to value the insights of those on whose shoulders we stand.

The revelation of God in Christ offers salvation to people of every time and every culture. Their understanding of that revelation and their response to it are capable of expanding the narrowness of our own perspectives and of challenging the apathy of our Christian living.

In a rapidly changing world, the danger is that we might develop an understanding of the Gospel which would be so tied to the problems and hopes of today that it would have nothing to say to the world of tomorrow. If we present a Gospel which is not the same as the one which we have received we engage in a pointless deception (cf. Gal 1:8, 2 Cor 11:4).

We have to avoid a limited, positivist exegesis which 'tends to lose sight of the essential message' and sees only the human words; we also have to beware of a fundamentalist interpretation which ignores the context and the literary forms and 'leads to all sorts of errors and illusions' (Pope John Paul, 14 December 1990).

The antidote to these blind alleys is to recognise the road along which God has travelled with his people. It is to recognise the particularity of God's approach: he reveals himself to particular people, in particular places, at particular times and, ultimately and most fully, in a particular Man. The divine mystery is manifested 'to the whole world from within the limitations of a particular people's existence' (Haight, J. F., 'Revelation', in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Gill and Macmillan 1987).

God does not reveal himself in some rarefied atmosphere outside human culture and history. At the same time, the self-revelation of God cannot be confined to any cultural or historical milieu. God reveals himself so that all may be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:4). The definitive Word of God, Jesus Christ, 'is the same yesterday and today and forever' (Heb 13:8).

The Bible has a vital role in enabling us to see that we are a people in communion with all the sons and daughters of God. His creative word brought the whole human race into existence and his saving Word, lifted up from the earth is drawing all people to himself (Jn 12:32). There people, whatever their culture, sex, or social standing, are one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28).

The magnificence of that revelation cannot be exhausted by the people of any culture or time. We are, perhaps, particularly prone to the temptation to think that only our culture and our perspective are really valid, that others are primitive or outdated or ignorant. We find it difficult to imagine that other times and cultures, past, present and future, might justifiably think the same of us! If we fail to recognise what we might learn from others, we not only impoverish ourselves, we weaken our ability to understand and welcome the Word of God:

... the Gospel message cannot be purely and simply isolated from the culture in which it was first inserted (the Biblical world or, more concretely, the cultural milieu in which Jesus of Nazareth lived), nor, without serious loss, from the cultures in which it has already been expressed down the centuries (Pope John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae* 53).

The recognition that we are not the source of all meaning allows us to recognise the Truth which is greater than we could ever imagine. In the same way, the recognition that God's Word can enlighten and purify cultures very different from ours, that it can find in them expressions of which we could never have dreamed, allows us to understand it with a new depth. In both cases what initially appears to depose us from the centre of things in fact opens our eyes to the real dignity which is ours as sons and daughters of God.

The Bible is a visible sign in the Church that our generation cannot be the criterion of all interpretation. The entire Christian religion 'should be nourished and ruled by sacred Scripture' (DV 21). To put it another way, a faith which is not in continuity with the faith of the Bible is not the Christian religion. Whatever its attractions and its brilliance, it is not the truth that makes us free. Really to understand the meaning of the sacred text involves taking seriously the fact that it is the expression of a culture different from ours:

Hence the exegete must look for that meaning which the sacred author, in a determined situation and given the circumstances of his time and culture, intended to express and did in fact express, through the medium of a contemporary literary form. Rightly to understand what the sacred author wanted to affirm in his work, due attention must be paid both to the customary and characteristic patterns of perception, speech and narrative which prevailed at the age of the sacred writer, and to the conventions which the people of his time followed in their dealings with one another (DV 12).

The Bible, therefore, punctures any undue presumption about the perspective of our times. To understand the Bible means being ready to try to enter into the patterns of perception, speech and narrative of authors who lived in a very different time and place. Indeed, that time and place have a unique importance as the situation in which God revealed himself and in which the Word became flesh. The Gospel message can never be 'purely and simply isolated' from that context which will remain always the point of reference.

Nor can the Gospel be isolated without serious loss from all the other settings in which it has been preached, celebrated and lived. In the first place, one must mention the Fathers of the Church. In terms of modern exegesis and scholarship, their work has great limitations. They did however approach the Bible with a veneration and a sense of devotion from which we can learn. Furthermore, it was they who began the task of drawing out the implications of the universality of the Gospel:

They became the example of a rich encounter between faith and culture, faith and reason, which continues to be a guide for the Church of all ages that is committed to preaching the Gospel to people of such different cultures and working in their midst (*Instruction on the Study of the Fathers of the Church*, Congregation for Catholic Education 32).

We have seen in recent months the re-emergence of Christians in Eastern Europe who have maintained 'the traditions which they had learned either by word of mouth or by letter (cf. 2 Thess 2:15) and (fought) hard for the faith that had been handed to them once and for all (cf. Jude 3)' (DV 8). Their fidelity can surely enrich ours. It is only right that we should respond to that fidelity through such initiatives as the National Bible Society's appeal, 'Famine of the Word'. As we provide Bibles for the local churches in the East, we will, I am sure, hear the Word of God eloquently spoken to us through their courage and their long ordeal.

The work of the National Bible Society of Ireland and of Bible Societies and the biblical apostolate throughout the world has been a marvellous story of the spreading of the Scriptures to people of many lands, bringing the Word of God to them in the words of their own languages.

The story of the spread of the Word of God through time and place is not just something to be admired. It is a challenge to us to acknowledge that the Word can be spoken as 'strength for their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life' to 'people of every race, language and way of life' (Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation II).

The realisation that the Word is not merely for our time or our little corner of the world is what urges us on to the mission of evangelisation. The realisation that the Word has not returned empty (Is 55:11) from any of the places to which it has been sent is what gives us the confidence to know that it is capable of speaking even to our unpredictable and often shallow world. As Bishop Bedell's translation puts it: 'Ní fhíllidh (mo bhriatharsa) chugam go diomhaoin, acht coimhliónfaidh sí an ní is toil liom'.

That is why the work of bringing the Bible and the faith of the Church to other places is not just an act by which we benefit other people. It is an act which expands our own understanding of the Word, our own ability to appreciate its breadth and depth: 'A true "incarnation" of faith through catechesis supposes not only a process of 'giving' but also of 'receiving' (Message of the Synod of Bishops [1977] par. 5).

I sometimes wonder whether this might not be an area which would repay a little thought and a little creativity. We have a remarkable tradition in Ireland of missionary effort, not alone in the biblical apostolate but in the entire field of evangelisation. Have we perhaps failed to learn as much as we could from that work? Any effort to 'translate' the Word into another language, any effort to plant the seed in a new soil ought to bring new insight, new depth, new vitality to the faith of the translator or sower. Has our understanding and living of the Gospel really been enriched to the extent that it might have been by our association with the planting, the assimilation and the growth of the Word in so many different settings?

That recognition of the diversity of the settings in which the Word has taken root is another reason why we should rejoice in the many ways in which the Word has been heard and lived in our various Christian denominations. Whatever the Holy Spirit has wrought and whatever is genuinely Christian can 'bring about a more perfect realisation of the mystery of Christ and the Church' (Vatican II, *Unitatis Redintegratio* 4). '... the sacred Word is a precious instrument in the mighty hand of God for attaining to that unity which the Saviour holds out to all' (ibid. 21).

## Witness to Hope

The third and final aspect of the Bible on which I would like to reflect is what *Dei Verbum*, in its opening paragraph indicated as the reason for producing a Constitution on Divine Revelation — so that the whole world would hear 'the summons to salvation'.

If we tend to lack a sense of the mystery of God and a sense of continuity with the past and with other cultures, our age also tends to lack a sense of direction. Although we have more reason than most generations to reflect on the end of the world, as we contemplate the destructive power at our disposal and the damage which we are doing to our environment. Nevertheless, we give little evidence of any vibrant hope for the life that God has prepared for his people when death shall be no more and the former things will have passed away (Rev 21:4).

The Bible is a book of hope. Only God is to be feared and yet God constantly approaches his people with the message, 'Fear not, for I am with you'. His promises are often introduced by that reassurance, 'Do not be afraid' (e.g. Gen 15:1; Is 43:1,5; Joel 2:21; Lk 12:32; Rev 1:17).

The promise of God which he speaks in the Bible, is what the world longs to hear. But it is a promise that, unfortunately, is often not heard. Cynicism, and hopelessness, an unwillingness to look beyond the immediate and the temporal, risk making life lonely, meaningless and empty. Because our world is so lacking in awareness of the power and love of God, our hopes are too limited and too shallow. Our first challenge in this area is to believe firmly that God's Word is living and active today, just as it has always been, in order to invite and receive people into God's company (DV 2).

Far from being something remote, irrelevant and removed from real life, the Word of God, and it alone, can penetrate to the depth of people's lives and situations 'piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart' (Heb 4:12).

No matter how hopeless the situation may seem, the Word is capable of revealing the Father who comes lovingly to meet his children. The more we understand that, the more the power of the Word is brought home to us. This is not just the answer to my individual longings; this is not just the answer to the longings of all the people I have known or heard of; this is not just the answer to the longings of all the people of recorded history. Every single human being of every time, past, present and future can discover in that Word the peace which alone can satisfy the profound restlessness in which we find 'what is most deeply human' (Redemptor Hominis 18). That restlessness testifies that we are made to rest only in God. The Word surpasses all human hopes and possibilities. The Word made flesh 'is the goal of human history, the focal point of the desires of history and of civilisation, the centre of humankind, the joy of all hearts, and the fulfilment of all aspirations' (Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* 45).

One of the great misconceptions and misrepresentations that have to be overcome in our world is the idea that Christianity, the faith of the Bible, is something limiting, joyless, inhuman.

The real truth is that the Bible is the Word of promise which invites us to the only fulfilment which is capable of responding to all the search for truth, all the longing for peace, all the desire for justice which has arisen in human lives:

This promise, which surpasses all human possibilities, directly concerns our life in this world. For true justice must include everyone; it must bring the answer to the immense load of suffering borne by all the generations. In fact, without the resurrection of the dead and the Lord's judgment, there is no justice in the full sense of the term. The promise of resurrection is freely made to meet the desire for true justice dwelling in the human heart (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation*, 60).

The Bible has a vital role in helping us to see that we are a people on a journey, called by God to be his people in his new creation.

The voice that sounds in the biblical writings is not, in the first instance, simply a source of information about God; it is the voice of God himself, calling and forming his people. The expression of God's choice and covenant runs right through the Bible from Exodus (6:7) to Revelation (21:3): 'You will be my people and I will be your God'.

The biblical apostolate is concerned not only with the availability of texts of the Scriptures. It is concerned to make the voice of God more fully audible in the lives of people. That will involve, as the Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation suggested last year, following the pedagogy of the road to Emmaus.

The first step is to listen, in order really to hear the pain and the fear and the hopelessness of the people we seek to evangelise. The Good News cannot be effectively communicated from outside people's lives and concerns — it can only be spoken from within, by becoming 'incarnate'. If we do not understand a situation, how can we hope to know how the Word of God might illuminate it, challenge it, offer it hope? If we are perceived as aloof, how can we imagine that anyone could recognise us as bearers of the Good News?

The second step is to help people to see their situation in a new light. By opening the Scriptures to the disciples, 'Jesus places the event, the cross, within the broader perspective of God's design and, thus, the disciples discover that they are not lost. The history of the world continues in the hands of God' (Plenary Assembly CBF, Bogotá 1990, 5.13)

The third step is not merely a new enlightenment but a new level of sharing, or better, of communion, in Christ: 'They recognised him at the breaking of bread' (Lk 24: 35). It is a new awareness of the Word of God giving himself to us and uniting us to himself and to each other.

This 'New Evangelisation' leads us to what Pope Paul VI called, 'the sources of Christian joy':

It is by becoming more present to God and by turning away from sin that a human being can truly enter into spiritual joy. Without doubt 'flesh and blood' are incapable of this. But Revelation can open up this possibility and grace can bring about this return (*Gaudete in Domino I*).

Seeking to bring the Word of God to others, and indeed seeking to listen to it ourselves, is nothing less than moving towards that sharing in the hopes, the fears, the joys, the agonies of others, which will allow us to hear what God says to them and to be transformed by that Word along with those to whom we try to bring it.

The Word of God itself is no mere word. The Hebrew *dabar* means both word and event:

Revelation is realised by deeds and words which are intrinsically bound up with one another. As result, the works performed by God in the history of salvation show forth and bear out the doctrine and the realities signified by the words; the words, for their part, proclaim the works, and bring to light the mystery they contain (*DV 1*).

That is the most fundamental reason why it is impossible effectively to proclaim the Word unless our words are matched by our deeds. The misconception that the biblical Word calls people to a grim and joyless way of life, should lead us to ask ourselves whether the joy of our faith shines as it should. Is the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22) as visible as it ought to be in the life of our communities?

The only effective answer to the shallowness of consumerism and secularism and the dehumanising trends of our world is a vision which is deeper, more joyful, more human, more just, more hopeful than they have to offer. That vision is to be found in the Bible. It is a vision which knows that the whole of creation, and of the new creation, is the fruit of the merciful love of God. The mercy of God is described by Pope John Paul as 'this central revelation':

[Mercy] is something that characterises the life of the whole people of Israel and each of its sons and daughters: mercy is the content of intimacy with their Lord, the content of their dialogue with him (*Dives in Misericordia 4*).

We are people created and redeemed by the infinitely merciful love of God. Everything about how we should live, how we should treat one another follows from this. There is, for instance, no longer any point in asking why I should be obliged to forgive without limit once I realise that my very existence and destiny are founded on limitless, forgiving love. Making known the word of God's love and the conversion which is required in order to receive it, is the task of every Christian:

Humanity is loved by God! This very simple yet profound proclamation is owed to humanity by the Church. Each Christian's words and life must make this proclamation resound: God loves you, Christ came for you, Christ is for you 'the Way, the Truth and the Life!' (Pope John Paul, *Christifideles Laici 34*)

## The Challenge

The challenge to us at the beginning of this Decade of Evangelisation is to make that proclamation heard. To do that,

- we must be humble before the mystery, approaching the Word with reverence,
- we must be open to learn from all of our sisters and brothers throughout history and in our own day who have listened to the same Word,
- we must be ready to know the reality in which the Word is to be become incarnate today.

Our response to that challenge, like the whole of the Christian life, has to be 'nourished and ruled by sacred Scripture':

Scripture verifies in the most perfect way the words: 'The Word of God is living and active' (Heb 4: 12), and 'is able to build you up and to give you the

inheritance among all those who are sanctified' (Acts 20: 32; cf. 1 Thess 2: 13) (DV 21).

Bedell/Boyle Lecture, 1991

## Response

+ GEORGE OTTO SIMMS

Bishop Murray has shown us that the Word of God is not to be confined to printed words only. Words can lie still and fixed on the page; the Word of God, living and active, is dynamic, revealing, communicative; expressed in words, but also in events, life-experiences, and action.

I think of a discussion that I entered into with Professor Ó Fiannachta whose Irish translation, with other scholars, is indeed alive and impressive.

I asked him about the opening phrase of the Bible, 'in the beginning God created heaven and earth'. The Bedell Bible, which we think of with special gratitude at this first Bedell-Boyle Lecture, has '*san tosach*' for 'in the beginning'. The 1981 Ó Fiannachta Bible has '*i dtús báire... chruthaigh Dia neamh agus talamh*'. A livelier translation of 'beginning' which indicates the power of the creative word. I hope I am interpreting him correctly, when I say that the word '*báire*' which expands the opening words of Genesis was used to point out that this was 'a start'; this is what took place 'at the onset'. This almighty Word was 'creative vigorous, a breakthrough'.

Bishop Murray's paper has encouraged us to see the Bible 'whole'. Perhaps we have emphasised statistics rather much in our Scripture lesson. We may know that, as in my tradition, there are thirty-nine books in the Old Testament and twenty-seven in the New Testament, but have we paid enough attention to the word 'Testament'? We constantly need to reflect on the relationship between the two Testaments. They are two but they are linked; the promise of the Old is found in the fulfilment of the New. Both are from God and God is one. We see the whole counsel of God among the many varied books, some historical, others prophetic, some few poetical, others in the form of personal letters, some Hebrew and some Greek.

We know that there are four Evangelists writing and recording the Good News, drawing upon conversations, memories, some spoken some written, yet there is only one Gospel. We know, too, that the first five (or, some say, the first six) books of the Bible are called 'the Law' (the instruction, the Torah), but it is when we come to learn from the whole Bible that God's love is the fulfilling of the law, that we perceive the unity of the Scriptures. Through Christ, called the Word, we are shown this unity and also the truth and holiness of the Word of God.

I read again the document *Dei Verbum* with those opening words which give the title of the official statement of the Second Vatican Council. I was interested to read its recommendation about the new translations of the Scriptures which have been appearing during this century. How encouraging to read that scholars of many traditions and backgrounds are co-operating in this important work. Not only are the translators anxious to be accurate and full of understanding in their versions, but they are enabling those who are not Christians to hear and to read the message. The scholar is needed in the mission of the Church throughout the world. So the phrase in the translated version of the document *Dei Verbum* caught my eye when I came to the reference to the translations 'being produced in co-operation with the separated brethren'. This openness seemed to set a headline for us in the National Bible Society of Ireland. In a particular way, another sentence from this document of the 1960s has been implemented; the reference is 'to the wise distribution of these ... [translations] ... in one way or another'. Bishop Murray's moving allusion to the great demand for Bibles in countries of Eastern Europe makes us realise that there is unfinished business for all of us who have the Society's aims at heart, to attend to.

When we speak of God's unity and the unity of the Scriptures, we do not mean to suggest that the details of the texts of all the books of the Bible should be neglected, or treated as mere details. Details, small words as well as key-words, do not deserve to be overlooked or treated as trivial.

I heard a lecturer, who certainly had the gift of showing that the words of Scripture were living and active, hold his audience spell-bound when he began his discourse on the Bible. I quote from Sir Edwyn Hoskyns, still known for his studies in St. John's Gospel. He began like this: 'Can we rescue a word and discover a universe? Can we bury our heads in a dictionary [his actual word was 'lexicon'] and rise in the presence of God?' The audience soon became breathless; they were infected by his excitement; and began to be committed to the message which he unfolded, right from the tiniest syllable! He loved the Greek word for 'truth' (*aletheia* - it is a Christian name we meet sometimes, Alethea), but for the professor it meant something compelling and forceful that could not be hidden, would not escape your notice. He saw that truth is great and prevailing. He searched the Scripture and found that truth 'will out'. He saw the 'a' in *aletheia* as a negative: not to be hidden, not to be forgotten or ignored.

Bishop Murray has given us some splendid key-words to think over: God transcendent, the human search for truth, and the hope that keeps us alive and active.

He made me think of the hiddenness of God as well as the revelation of God in the Scripture.

There is a story that runs like a thread through the Bible. The theme of seeking and finding.

Sometimes, God shows himself on the mountain, or in the valley amid the conflicts of life. Sometimes he seems to human eyes to be hidden. Isaiah cried (45:15), 'Truly you are a God that hides yourself'; the psalm-writer feels alone (Ps 88 :14 - 'Why, O Lord, do you hide your face from me?'). Job felt that he was being tested, as he looked everywhere for God.

People in the Scriptures sometimes think that they can hide from God. That early question heard by the man hiding 'in the garden in the cool of the day', 'Where are you?' was a question that searched, not for information or some clue, but rather for a reuniting, restoring to a proper place in the open, a partnership.

One prayer written centuries later seemed to grasp the point. In addressing God, Pascal prayed: 'I could not seek you, Lord, had you not already found me'. St Augustine's words are woven into a similar prayer: 'Help us, Lord, so to seek you, whom our souls desire to love, that we may both find you, and be found by you'.

Bishop Murray's words about the 'New Evangelisation', about bringing the Word of God to others and sharing in the fears and joys of us all, made me see the value of our National Bible Society's activities. The Scriptures come alive in personal prayer, in the silence, away from it all. They become lively in study, discussion, in songs of praise and solemn, sacramental times of worship. They also become better understood, through question and answer, in the meeting of minds and ever-varying personalities.

I often think of what seems to be the first example of 'a Bible-study group' or 'a Scripture class'. That meeting of Philip the deacon in Acts 8:30 when he encounters the Ethiopian at the roadside. Resting in his chariot, on a return journey from Jerusalem towards the south, the African is found and heard reading from the prophet Isaiah (ch. 53). He must have had a puzzled look for Philip comes up to him with a question, hoping to be able to help. 'Do you understand what you are reading?' he asked. 'How can I?', replied the Ethiopian, 'unless someone explains it to me?' Then Philip explains not only about the suffering servant 'led as a lamb to the slaughter', but also about Jesus. The stranger grasps the meaning, but, more than that, he wants to belong to Philip's Church, the fellowship of believers in Christ. He asks to be baptized. He commits himself. He becomes committed.

Hearing the Scriptures read aloud, among a group of worshippers, great or small, can be a moving, stirring experience, if the listener listens expectant, receptive, and tuned in.

The congregation in the synagogue at Nazareth was probably quite familiar with the opening words of Isaiah 61! One member of a local family was the reader on a certain day. There was something in the voice, in the sound of the usually over-

familiar words, in the setting that made them look and hold their eyes with special concentration upon what they heard. It was a wonderful experience, but disturbing too. They were shaken. Christ had made those words alive and active. He gave new meaning to 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor'. Some, in the congregation, were furious. (Luke 4:15)

A final reflection, I found the openness of this Bedell-Boyle discourse refreshing. It is clear that there are risks in finding ourselves free to explore the Scriptures, to study the sources, to find new meanings and fresh light on puzzling passages of the text. Many, apart from Scripture scholars, can help us in our exploration: the archaeologist can dig up new and exciting evidence, fresh discoveries including the Dead Sea Scrolls can fill in some gaps in our knowledge. The translations, which are not merely word for word, but which also convey meanings in the idioms and illustrations of many cultures throughout the world, enrich our understanding. Christianity which started in the Middle East is not restricted to the language and thought-forms of the West. We in the West are already grateful to the Christians in Africa who have shown us the strength of joy, and even laughter, in their worship together. The Indian Christians have taught us to be still and know God in quiet, patient meditation, in ways of listening to and obeying the message of the Scriptures; Christians in Japan, with colour and glorious artistry, open our eyes more often than we realise to the radiance of the gospel, to cultured interpretations of such prophecies as 'how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of them that bring good tidings that publish peace'.

We can find unity in the message of the Scriptures and the many biblical books accepted as standard and authoritative. Unity, too, can be found in varied traditions, in different commentaries, in some freshly discovered meanings, so long as they are in harmony with the biblical teaching, and, as the saying goes, as long as these traditions are 'consonant with' the Scriptures. The one Christ, to whom witness is borne, in the continuing life of all who belong to him in his body, gives unity to us, who share the humanity which he shared. The one Christ triumphs in a world full of conflict, suffering, division, and spiritual apathy and indifference. His love is victorious over evil. In his loving will is our peace.

## The Bedell / Boyle Lecture Series

The annual Lecture provides an opportunity to promote the Bible in the media and to a wider audience.

Each year a speaker of world stature, or who has demonstrated national leadership in a particular field, is asked to speak on a topic relating some aspect of the Holy Scriptures to modern life. The Society will publish the Lecture.

The Lecture is named in honour of the Hon. Robert Boyle (1626-91) who made a large contribution to the printing and publishing of Bibles for Ireland, Scotland and Wales and also to propagating Christianity in America and Malaya. He was a President of the Royal Society and the distinguished scientist of Boyle's Law. It is also intended to honour William Bedell (1571- 1642), Bishop of Kilmore and Ardagh, who is famous for an Irish translation of the Old Testament and for Bedell's Bible, published in 1685; Boyle was concerned with its publication.

NATIONAL BIBLE SOCIETY OF IRELAND