



Archbishop of Canterbury

‘The Bible Today: Reading & Hearing’

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One of the things that most clearly and universally identifies Christians as Christians is that they habitually read the Bible – or have the Bible read to them. From the most liberal to the most conservative, from Pentecostals in Venezuela to Orthodox in Albania, those who call themselves Christians are engaged in a complex and a varied set of relationships with this written text, relationships which shape the patterns of worship, teaching and ethical discourse. Not even the most tradition-bound and hierarchical Christian community has ever seriously argued that the authority of the contemporary hierarchy can wholly displace the reading of Scripture, or that the language of scripture is anything but finally normative in some sense for the community. And even the most ideologically insistent liberal is unlikely to argue that Scripture can be relegated *entirely* to the level of illustrative historical material about the remote beginnings of the faith (though the last century has seen a repeated swing in that direction, even if it has never quite got to that point of blunt denial). In what follows, I don’t intend to offer a novel theory of inspiration, or a set of tools that will finally settle the current debates over interpretation within and between the churches; my aim is a very modest one, to examine the *practice* of reading the Bible so as to tease out some of what it tells us about the nature of Christian identity itself. Because some of our present difficulties are, at the very least, compounded by the collision of theologically inept or rootless accounts of Scripture, and it seems imperative to work at a genuine theology of the Bible as the sacred literature of the Church. Popular appeals to the obvious leave us battling in the dark; and the obvious – not surprisingly – looks radically different to different people. For many, it is obvious that a claim to the effect that Scripture is ‘God’s Word written’ implies a particular set of beliefs about the Bible’s inerrancy. For others, it is equally obvious that, if you are not that savage and menacing beast called a ‘fundamentalist’, you are bound to see the Bible as a text of its time, instructive, even sporadically inspiring, but subject to rethinking in the light of our more advanced position. As I hope will become evident, I regard such positions as examples of the rootlessness that afflicts our use of the Bible; and I hope that these reflections may suggest a few ways of reconnecting with a more serious theological grasp of the Church’s relation with Scripture.

To begin with the simplest point: before Scripture is read in private, it is heard in public. Those of us who assume that the normative image of Scripture reading is the solitary individual poring over a bound volume, one of the great icons of classical Protestantism, may need to be reminded that for most Christians throughout the ages and probably most in the world at present, the norm is *listening*. Very few early or mediaeval Christians could possibly have owned a Bible; not many in the rapidly growing churches of the developing world today are likely to either. And this underlines the fact that the Church's public use of the Bible represents the Church as defined in some important way by listening: the community when it comes together doesn't only break bread and reflect together and intercede, it silences itself to hear something. It represents itself in that moment as a community existing in *response* to a word of summons or invitation, to an act of communication that requires to be heard and answered.

So the Church in reading Scripture publicly says both (i) that it is not a self-generated reality, created simply out of human reflection and ideals, and (ii) that what is read needs to be read *as a communicative act*, - that is, not as information, not as just instruction, but as a summons to assemble together as a certain sort of community, one that understands itself as called and created 'out of nothing'. Whatever we do in private with our reading of Scripture, we must do in awareness of this public character. The Church - a familiar enough point - is in the language of the Bible itself an 'assembly', a 'convocation': an *ekklesia*. It declares its basic character when it represents itself as listening to the act of 'convoking', calling together. From one (crucially important) point of view, the celebration of the Eucharist is that representation, the moment when all are equally and unequivocally designated as guests, responding to invitation. But, since the authoritative and defining patterns of Christian practice never reduce themselves to single and simple models, from another point of view, the hearing of the Bible is that representation. As I hope to suggest later, these two basic ways in which the Church says what it is cast a lot of light on each other.

Now this already implies a certain challenge in understanding the Bible. Not all of it by any means is cast in the grammatical form of invitation or summons. There are substantial bits of it that read like that - much of the Mosaic Law and the Prophets, and the letters of Christian Scripture, for example. But we have to work out what it means to say that a Hebrew genealogy, the Song of Songs, the laments of Job and the Psalmist, the narratives of the gospels and the visions of Revelation are *equally* acts of communication whose effect is to convoke the assembly of faithful. It must sometimes strike the worshipper as slightly strange to be asked to say, 'This is the Word of the Lord' at the end of a passage *addressed* to the Lord - not least one addressed to the Lord in terms of query or even reproach.

Two principles emerge very directly from this, though they are not always stated clearly in the Church. The first is that when we are dealing with texts that *are* grammatically addressed to a specific audience, we are being asked to imagine that historically remote audience as not only continuous with us but in some sense one with us. Just as in Deuteronomy, there is an insistence that the words spoken at Sinai are being spoken 'not to your forefathers' but to 'us' here present today - to all those in the liturgical assembly at any moment in Israel's history (Dt 5.2-5), so for the Christian - and the Jewish - believer. We, here and now, are incorporated in the audience. The second principle is that in dealing with texts that are not grammatically directed in this way, we are obliged to ask, 'What does this text suggest or imply about the changes which reading it or hearing it might bring about?' The Bible itself gives us a cardinal example of 'texts' - oral recitations in this case - clearly intended to effect change: the parables of Jesus. And the sort of change they envisage is the result of being

forced to identify yourself within the world of the narrative, to recognise who you are or might be, how your situation is included in what the parable narrates.

These principles need a good deal of further filling out if we are to be able to apply them to some of the hardest interpretative cases, but they are significant and, I'd say, primary implications of the practice of hearing Scripture publicly. Both tell us that the 'time' in which we hear Scripture is not like ordinary time. We are contemporary with events remote in history; we are caught up in the time of recitation, when we are to reimagine ourselves. For this moment, we exist simply as listeners, suspending our questions while the question is put to us of how we are to speak afresh about ourselves. We stand at a point of origin, and, as listeners, our primary responsibility is to receive. Kierkegaard stressed this receptive dimension eloquently in some of his writings; but a recent discussion (by Alan Jacobs in his excellent book, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love*, pp.107-12) notes importantly that there is a risk of so glossing the receptivity of the reader/hearer as to dissolve the proper tension between I and Other. Receiving as itself an *act* of enabling communication requires the free engagement of a self with skills and history. What this might mean we shall come back to shortly. But it remains true that this level of reading cannot happen if we are dominated by the time we think we occupy, so that anything coming at us through an alien text is likely to be processed into whatever most concerns us now and subjected to the criteria by which we judge something as useful or useless for the time of our plans and projects. And this has some implications for the whole of our thinking about worship, of course.

Among those skills we need to bring for receptivity is a capacity to think through what the initial relation between text and audience might be. I am not thinking primarily here of the way in which good critical scholarship elucidates such relations, though that is one of the underappreciated gifts of intellectual modernity – the enrichment of sheer historical imagination in ways barely accessible to most premodern readers and hearers. What I have in mind is a more basic matter, the capacity to read/hear *enough* to sense the directedness of a text. Fragmentary reading is highly risky to the extent that it abstracts from what various hermeneutical theorists (Ricoeur above all) have thought of as the world 'in front of the text' – the specific needs that shape the movement and emphasis of the text itself. Elements in that text may be valid and significant, but yet be capable of partial and even distorting use if not seen as part of a rhetorical process or argument. It is always worth asking, 'What is the text as a full unit trying not to say or to deny?'

Two contentious examples. The first of them is, as we shall see, of more than accidental importance in understanding certain things about Scripture as a whole, but I choose it because of its frequent use in modern debates about relations between faith communities. Jesus says in the Farewell Discourses of John's Gospel that 'no-one comes to the Father except by me'. As an isolated text, this is regularly used to insist that salvation depends upon explicit confession of Christ, and so as a refutation of any attempt to create a more 'inclusive' theology of interfaith relations. But the words come at the end of a typically dense and compressed piece of exposition. Jesus has, at the end of ch.13, explained that the disciples cannot follow him now; he goes ahead to prepare a place. Thus, he creates the path to the Father that the disciples must follow; they know the path already in the sense that they know him. And this knowledge of him, expressed in the mutual love that he has made possible (13.34-5), will carry them through the devastation of absence and not-knowing which will follow the crucifixion. Seeing and knowing Jesus as he goes towards his death in the perfection of his 'love for his own' is already in some way a knowing of the Father as that

goal towards which the self-giving of Jesus in life and death is directed. The Father is not to be known apart from this knowledge of Jesus.

Now this certainly does not suggest in any direct way a more inclusive approach to other faiths. But the point is that the actual question being asked is not about the fate of non-Christians; it is about how the disciples are to understand the death of Jesus as the necessary clearing of the way which they are to walk. If they are devastated and left desolate by his death, they have not grasped that it is itself the opening of a way which would otherwise remain closed to them. Thus it is part of the theology of the cross that is evolving throughout the later chapters of John, the mapping out of a revelation of glory through self-forgetting and self-offering. The text in question indeed states that there is no way to the Father except in virtue of what Jesus does and suffers; but precisely because that defines the way we must then follow, it is (to say the least) paradoxical if it is used as a simple self-affirmation for the exclusive claim of the Christian institution or the Christian system. There is, in other words, a way of affirming the necessity of Christ's crucified mediation that has the effect of undermining the very way it is supposed to operate. If we ask what the question is that the passage overall poses, or what the change is that needs to be taking place over the time of the passage's narration, it is about the move from desolation in the face of the cross (Jesus' cross and the implicit demand for the disciple to carry the cross also) to confidence that the process is the work of love coming from and leading to the Father.

My second example is even more contentious in the present climate; and once again I must stress that the point I am making is not that the reading I proposes settles a controversy or changes a substantive interpretation but that many current ways of reading miss the actual direction of the passage and so undermine a proper theological approach to Scripture. Paul in the first chapter of Romans famously uses same-sex relationships as an illustration of human depravity – along with other 'unnatural' behaviours such as scandal, disobedience to parents and lack of pity. It is, for the majority of modern readers the most important single text in Scripture on the subject of homosexuality, and has understandably been the focus of an enormous amount of exegetical attention.

What is Paul's argument? And, once again, what is the *movement* that the text seeks to facilitate? The answer is in the opening of chapter 2: we have been listing examples of the barefaced perversity of those who cannot see the requirements of the natural order in front of their noses; well, it is precisely the same perversity that affects those who have received the revelation of God and persist in self-seeking and self-deceit. The change envisaged is from confidence in having received divine revelation to an awareness of universal sinfulness and need. Once again, there is a paradox in reading Romans 1 as a foundation for identifying *in others* a level of sin that is not found in the chosen community.

Now this gives little comfort to either party in the current culture wars in the Church. It is not helpful for a 'liberal' or revisionist case, since the whole point of Paul's rhetorical gambit is that everyone in his imagined readership *agrees* in thinking the same-sex relations of the culture around them to be as obviously immoral as idol-worship or disobedience to parents. It is not very helpful to the conservative either, though, because Paul insists on shifting the focus away from the *objects* of moral disapprobation in chapter 1 to the reading/hearing *subject* who has been up to this point happily identifying with Paul's castigation of someone else. The complex and interesting argument of chapter 1 about certain forms of sin beginning by the 'exchange' of true for false perception and natural for unnatural desire stands, but now has to be applied not to the pagan world alone but to the 'insiders' of the chosen community.

Paul is making a primary point not about homosexuality but about the delusions of the supposedly law-abiding.

As I have said, this does nothing to settle the exegetical questions fiercely debated at the moment. But I want to stress that what I am trying to define as a strictly theological reading of Scripture, a reading in which the present community is made contemporary with the world in front of the text, is bound to give priority to the question that the text specifically puts and to ask how the movement, the transition, worked for within the text is to be realised in the contemporary reading community. To move too rapidly to the use of the text to make a general point which does not require the reader to be converted is to step outside what I have been calling the time of the text, the process by which it shapes its question. It is to make the text more passive than active, and so to move away from the stance of the listener, from the stance of the Church as trying to be still enough to hear and free enough to respond to God's summons to be his community. Of course the work of exegesis to establish doctrine and ethics is unavoidable; commentary is always going on. But the first moment of commentary – if this emphasis on the basic character of listening is correct – needs to be the tracing of the 'time' of a text so as to chart where it is moving.

A similar point is made by the Jewish scholar Peter Ochs, whose work on hermeneutics has been so fruitful in recent years. In an essay published in 2005, he sketches the debates within rabbinic tradition around the relation between the oral and the written Torah – rabbinical tradition and the text as delivered at Sinai. Rather than treating written Torah as a straightforward, unambiguous declaration of God's will needing minimal interpretation, with oral Torah as an accumulation of commentary that simply lays out what has been handed down by rabbinic transmission from Moses to the present day, we need, Ochs suggests, following the influential Talmudic scholar David Weiss Halivni, and the biblical exegete, Michael Fishbane, a model in which oral Torah is indeed continuous with written Torah, not as a kind of supplement but as a continuation of the process already going on in written Torah. The written text is not a synchronic 'surface' of isolated acts of communication; it is a text in which the component parts are in relation with each other, making sense of each other: oral Torah is the ongoing attempt to clarify those relations. 'The Oral Torah reads the Written Torah, alone, but between its verses' (Ochs, 'Scripture', pp.104-118 in *Fields of Faith. Theology and Religious Studies for the Twenty-first Century*, p.111). The divine action that is going on in Scripture is not just a relation between every atomised bit of text and God, but also God elucidating text by text, element by element. Instead of 'the things of the world...correspond[ing], one for one, to the words of Torah', they correspond to the relations between the words of Torah (ibid.).

This is a little obscurely worded, but its import is clear. If we speak of the effect of Scripture being the creation of an analogy of situation between the world in front of the text and the world of the current reader/hearer, this is not simply to say that any isolated piece of the text speaks unambiguously and without need of gloss to a current situation. It is rather to claim that the connections between elements of scriptural text, the connections that constitute what I have here been calling its 'movement', will be uncovered in the reader's world as still effecting the same movement and making the same overall demands. The reader who shares the covenant relationship with the first recipients of Torah – to stay with Ochs' argument for the moment – has to draw out the connection between the initial goal of Torah as a whole, which is the establishing of the covenant people in holiness and faithfulness, and the condition of Israel now, so as to find the interpretation 'that speaks most 'truly' to the ends of renewing Judaism today, after Destruction' (ibid. 113) – the destruction of the Temple, the

destruction of the Shoah, or any other historical catastrophe that poses a prima facie challenge to the continuity of God's people then and now.

The Christian may seem not to be working with the same kind of issue around radical disruption in continuity – until we reflect on the division of the Testaments itself, with the cross of Jesus as its pivot, as inscribing an analogous problem at the heart of Scripture. Christian Scripture, the New Testament, is already a work of interpretation, a statement of some very paradoxical connections; it is an attempt to chart what is 'between' the texts of Jewish Scripture on which it works. So the form of our twofold canon itself warns against any readings that seek to sidestep the tracing of connections and movement. This is not at all to subscribe to the easy formula that as Jesus or Paul can apparently overturn the plain meaning of the texts they handle, so the contemporary reader has the liberty to determine what is the most fruitful reading simply on the grounds of what is now purportedly suggested by the Holy Spirit for the health of the present community. This would dissolve the real otherness and integrity of the text. It is not that we are given only a method of interpretation by the form of Scripture – a method that, by pointing us to the conflict and tension between texts simply leaves us with theologically unresolvable debate as a universal norm for Christian discourse (I make the point partly in order to correct what some have – pardonably – understood as the implication of what I have written elsewhere on this matter). There is a substantive and discernible form. The canon is presented to us as a whole, whose unity is real and coherent, even if not superficially smooth. To quote from Kevin Vanhoozer's recent and magisterial work on *The Drama of Doctrine. A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, p.137, 'The canon both recounts the history of God's covenantal dealings with humanity and regulates God's ongoing covenantal relationship with his people...[I]t is the text that "documents" our covenantal privileges and responsibilities.' We must acknowledge the tensions and internal debates in Scripture; we must also acknowledge the clear sense that the text is presented as a narrative of 'fulfilment' – as one that contains a vision claiming comprehensiveness of meaning. We are to locate ourselves within *this* set of connections and engagements, the history of Israel, called, exiled, restored, and of Jesus crucified and risen and alive in the Spirit within the community, not to regard Scripture as one element in a merely modern landscape of conflicts.

Vanhoozer writes of the Church as 'staging' what Scripture unfolds. Relating this to my earlier discussion, it suggests that the reading community listens so as to be not only summoned into being in the abstract but so as to be called into specific, self-identifying action, action that seeks to embody the Kingdom. And, looking at the full range of scriptural language and demand, this is not just the embodying of formal precept and instruction: it is the re-production of those patterns of faithful response spelled out in the narrative – further energised and further complicated by the interweaving of patterns of unfaithful and partial response. How are we to re-enact the faith of Abraham or David while recognising that areas of the narrative of Abraham and David are themselves brought under judgement as the text unfolds, judged within the 'movement' of the text? How are we to be faithful to Torah as given to the people of the First Covenant while recognising that the whole notion of Torah is reshaped by the events of Jesus' life and death? Going back for a moment to the text I discussed from the Farewell Discourses a little while ago, we must ultimately say that the reading and hearing required will be found as we find what it is to walk the way of Jesus as he goes to his Father by way of his cross.

A *written* text inevitably has about it a dual character. It comes before the reader/hearer as a finished product, and so as something that can in some ways be treated as an object. If we

are not careful its written character can be misused by working with the text as if it were passive. In contrast to the event of a voice speaking, it can be abstracted from the single occasion when the hearer has no control over what comes to her or him from outside. At the same time, a written text requires re-reading; it is never read for the last time, and it continuously generates new events of interpretation. It is fruitful of renewed communication in a way that the spoken word alone cannot be. So to identify a written text as sacred is to claim that the continuous possibility of re-reading, the impossibility of reading for the last time, is a continuous openness to the intention of God to communicate. Just as the text itself contains re-reading, is almost *constituted* by re-reading, so that it repeatedly recreates a movement towards conversion (towards the cross of Jesus, in Christian terms), so the eternal possibility of 'reading again' stands as a warning against ignoring the active 'restlessness' of the text in summoning the reader to change. The writtleness of the text is from one point of view risky as a strategy of communication: it risks the appearance of passivity, and the re-readability of the text risks the appearance of indeterminacy. Yet from another point of view it can be seen as inseparable from the risk of the communication it itself describes as well as enacts – a divine communication that is never without human speech and narrative, never just an interruption of the created continuum but a pressure upon it that opens up to the divine by the character of its internal relations and connections, the shifting, penitent perspective of a story enacted in time. The writtleness of the text is like the sheer factuality of the historical past as the vehicle of revelation: it is something irreversibly *done*, but for that very reason continuously inviting or demanding.

[A note here on the notion of canonicity so fully discussed by Vanhoozer: were we to treat Scripture's limits as negotiable, we should be challenging the significance of the written character of scriptural revelation. If we were asking whether there could be supplements to Scripture, 'third testaments' and so on, we should be attempting to assess the revelatory claims of various texts that, in the nature of the case, had not been read publicly and communally in the way scriptural texts have been, and therefore not read continuously in anything like the same sense. The closed canon establishes the same texts as the material for public reading for indefinite time; these texts have the indisputably 'closed' character of the historical past, pointing to an act already definitively enacted, an act to which future reception must respond. Opening the canon (itself a strained use of language if you think about it) would mean that something was being negotiated that was not primarily and essentially response to an act already performed. We should have a hybrid view of revelation as text plus supplements – additional elements, written or unwritten, uncontrolled by the limits of a text whose identity is fixed as historical. This is the substance of the Reformation objection to certain decadent views of tradition, views decisively rejected by later Catholic thought also.]

I have used the language of invitation and summons at a number of points earlier in this essay, and in the final sections of it I want to return to this theme, since it will illuminate some of the issues just touched upon about the specificity and coherence of scriptural revelation. We noted earlier that the celebration of the Eucharist and the reading of the Bible are the most universal ways in which the Church 'represents' what it is; and both show the Church as a community committed to listening afresh to its foundational call. The gathering of the assembly for worship is not simply a human routine, however much it may come to look like that. It is, theologically speaking, a moment in which the *present* activity of God is assumed and responded to.

But to read Scripture in the context of the Eucharist – which has been from the beginning of the Church the primary place for it – is to say that the Word of God that acts in the Bible is a Word directed towards those changes that bring about the Eucharistic community. The summons to the reader/hearer is to involvement in the Body of Christ, the agent of the Kingdom, as we have seen; and that Body is what is constituted and maintained by the breaking of bread and all that this means. For Paul, exploring it in I Corinthians, the celebration of the Lord's Supper is strictly bound up with the central *character* of the community: what is shown in the Eucharist is a community of interdependence and penitent self-awareness, discovering the dangers of partisan self-assertion or uncritical reproduction of the relations of power and status that prevail in the society around. So if Scripture is to be heard as summons or invitation before all else, this is what it is a summons *to*. And the reading and understanding of the text must be pursued in this light. We ask what change is envisaged or required in the 'time' of any passage of Scripture; and now we can add that whatever change that is in particular, it must make sense in the context of the formation of *this* kind of community – the Eucharistic Body.

Take Scripture out of this context of the invitation to sit at table with Jesus and to be incorporated into his labour and suffering for the Kingdom, and you will be treating Scripture as either simply an inspired supernatural guide for individual conduct or a piece of detached historical record – the typical exaggerations of Biblicist and liberal approaches respectively. For the former, the work of the Spirit is more or less restricted to the transformation of the particular believer; for the latter, the life of the community is where the Spirit is primarily to be heard and discerned, with Scripture an illuminating adjunct at certain points. But grasp Scripture as part of the form taken by the divine act of invitation that summons and establishes the community around the Lord's Table, and the Bible becomes coherent at a new level, as a text whose meaning is most centrally to do with the passage from rivalry and self-assertion and the enmity with God that is bound up with these to the community in which each, by the influx of the Spirit, takes responsibility for all, and all for each. The context of the Eucharist, in which everyone present is there simply because they are guests by the free generosity of the host, obliges a reading of Scripture in which what is decisive is always this shared dependence on God's initiative of welcome which removes pride and fear.

But equally, take Scripture out of the Eucharistic context and the Eucharist itself becomes different. Without this anchorage in the history of God's creative welcome as slowly and painfully spelled out in the history of Israel and Jesus, the Eucharist can more readily be distorted into a celebration of what the community now senses itself to be or to have achieved. It is robbed of the analogy that makes it contemporary with the founding act – what you might call the 'Deuteronomic analogy', thinking back to the text from Deut.5 discussed earlier ('Not to your forefathers...'), and so does not see itself as formed by a divine communication that is in fact conveyed through human history, through the record of faithful and unfaithful response. If the Eucharist is properly a covenant meal, as the founding text declares, it presupposes a connectedness with the history of the covenant people; it always has (setting aside for a moment the debates over whether the Last Supper was historically a Passover meal) a Passover dimension.

Thus Eucharist and Scripture need to be held together if we are to have an adequate theology of either. The Eucharist is the primary locus of the listening Church, the place where it shows itself to be there in response to the call of God; and the Scripture that embodies that call has to be read as leading to precisely this point, the existence of a community that embodies Christ and does so by reflecting his kenotic act. And as I have hinted already, this

must be anchored clearly in a theology of the Spirit, which holds the two themes together. The Spirit, according to John's gospel, is the remembrancer, the divine agency that makes the words of Christ contemporary. It is the Spirit that incorporates us into one community with the disciples at the Last Supper and indeed with the Deuteronomically imagined people of Israel. It is the Spirit that enables the mutual self-offering that builds up the Body and that unites the members in the prayer of the glorified Christ. It is the Spirit that *connects* the periods of God's communicative action towards humanity and thus connects the diverse texts that make up the one manifold text that we call Holy Scripture. The Spirit's work as 'breathing' God's wisdom into the text of Scripture is not a magical process that removes biblical writing from the realm of actual human writing; it is the work of creating one 'movement' out of the diverse historical narratives and textual deposits that represent Israel's and the Church's efforts to find words to communicate God's communication of summons and invitation. The Spirit through the events of God's initiative stirs up those words and makes sense of them for the reader/hearer in the Spirit-sustained community. As Karl Barth insisted, this leaves no ground for breaking up Scripture into the parts we can 'approve' as God-inspired and the parts that are merely human; the whole is human and the whole is offered by God in and through the life of the Body, always shaping and determining the form of that life.

The Spirit in the New Testament, not least in the Johannine tradition, is associated in its fullness with the resurrection of Jesus; and my final point is to note the way in which Eucharist and Scripture alike have to be considered in relation to belief in the resurrection. The Eucharist itself is generally recognised as, among other things, a continuation of Jesus' meal-fellowship with the marginal and disreputable in Israel; by this fellowship, he declares a new way of being Israel that will not restrict membership to those who can satisfy conditions but will be open to all who are ready to be welcomed by him in the name of Israel's God. The eucharistic encounter is with the Christ who is still today actively defining the people of God simply by his invitation. Seen like this, the eucharist is not the memorial of past meals with Jesus but the reality of contemporary response to his hospitality – a hospitality once and for all established as indestructible by the cross and the resurrection, so that what was done in the ministry of Jesus in Galilee and Jerusalem is done constantly in the history of the Church.

But to say that Christ's transforming hospitality is renewed constantly in this history is also to say that Christ continues to *speak* in and to the community. The community exists because of God's act of communication, as we have seen repeatedly; the resurrection is the persistence of that act. Without belief in the resurrection, our understanding of Scripture is going to be deficient at best. If it is not the present vehicle of God speaking in the risen Christ, it is a record only of God speaking to *others*. For it to be an address that works directly upon self and community now, it must be given to us as the continuation of the same act, the re-presenting and re-enacting of the same scriptural reality of invitation and the creation of a people defined by justice, mutual service and the liberty to relate to God as Father and faithful partner.

So in sum: what I believe we need for a renewed theological grasp of Scripture is (i) the recognition that Scripture is something *heard* in the event where the community affirms its identity and seeks its renewal; (ii) the development of the skills needed to explore the analogy and continuity between the world 'in front of' the text and the current context, so as at least to avoid the misuse of texts by abstracting them from the questions they actually put; (iii) thus also, the discernment of where any given section of Scripture is moving – what are the changes it sets out and proposes for the reader/hearer; (iv) an understanding that this last is

decisively and authoritatively illuminated by the Eucharistic setting of biblical reading; (v) the consequent holding together of Eucharist and Scripture through a strong doctrine of the Spirit's work in constructing the community of Christ's Body; and (vi) the recognition that neither Scripture nor Eucharist makes sense without commitment to the resurrection of Jesus as the fundamental condition of a Church whose identity is realised in listening and responding. Reading Scripture theologically and understanding theologically the process of reading – all this is essentially about seeing Scripture as the vehicle of God's act to bring about conversion. Ultimately, Scripture brings us back to the uniquely creative moment of God's freedom – to the grace of a free self-bestowal that can create what is other and then, by love and welcome, transform that other into a sharer and communicator of the same joyful, generative act. 'The word of life...[that] we have seen and heard we declare to you, so that you and we together may share in a common life, that life which we share with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ' (I Jn.1.1-3).

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