

If there is anything wise in this human life which might encourage us to maintain a serene soul in the midst of the cares and tumults of the world, it is especially, I think, meditation on and knowledge of the Scriptures.

St Jerome, *Commentary on Ephesians*, Preface

INTRODUCTION

*O God, who gave the Priest Saint Jerome
a living and tender love for sacred Scripture,
grant that your people may be
ever more fruitfully nourished by your Word
and find it in the fount of life.*

Collect, 30th September

“Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119(118):105). The sacred Scriptures, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, are at once God’s revelation of himself, a guide to holiness and a source of nourishment for the spiritual life. “For what page or what word of the divinely authorised Old and New Testament is not a most direct rule for human life?” asks St Benedict in the final chapter of his Rule¹ (cf. 2 Timothy 3:16–17). Pope Benedict XVI echoes this in the conclusion of *Verbum Domini*, emphasising also the role of the Church, “We must never forget that all authentic and living Christian spirituality is based on the word of God proclaimed, accepted, celebrated and meditated upon in the Church.”²

“In the sacred books the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children and talks with them.”³ We are privileged to be recipients of this divine initiative. Silent attentiveness will help us to enter more deeply into the intimate relationship with God that he desires. Cardinal Sarah describes *lectio divina* as,

a moment of silent listening, contemplation and profound recollection in the light of the Spirit ... the Word read in silence

¹*The Rule of St Benedict*, 73.

² Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 121.

³ Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 21.

accompanies us, enlightens us and feeds us ... This Word is loved, revisited regularly, sought out, because it is the Presence of the One who loves us eternally. Through it, he who seeks my soul is there. He meets me, and I meet him. He reveals himself to me, and he reveals me to myself.⁴

In the parable of the sower (Luke 8:5–15), Our Lord speaks of the word of God as seed. The fruitfulness, or lack of it, depends upon the quality of the soil which receives it. The seed which falls on the path, rocky ground or among thorns produces nothing. “As for that in the good soil, they are those who hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit with patience” (v.15). We are invited to be this good soil, and Cardinal Ratzinger explains how: “To be soil for the Word means that the soil must allow itself to be absorbed by the seed, to be assimilated by the seed, to surrender itself for the sake of transforming the seed into life.”⁵

This is the way for the Church and each of her members to bear fruit. Mary, the Mother of God, is our model. Her womb was fruitful soil for the seed of the Incarnate Word of God sown by the Holy Spirit; her heart was equally fruitful soil as she “kept” and “pondered” everything there (cf. Luke 2:19; 2:51). Like her, “we must once more become waiting, inwardly recollected people who in the depth of prayer, longing, and faith give the Word room to grow.”⁶

The Old and New Testaments form a unity, the old preparing the way for and fully explained by the New, the New hidden in the Old and bringing it to fulfilment. They both proclaim the mystery of Christ, “the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest” (Colossians 1:26). He himself said so, “You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that

⁴ Robert Cardinal Sarah, *The Power of Silence* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2019), pp. 240–241.

⁵ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mary—the Church at the Source* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), p. 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

bear witness to me ... If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me” (John 5:39, 46). And after his Resurrection, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27).

The words Christ speaks are those he has received from his Father, and it is in the light of these words that the final judgment will be made. “He who rejects me and does not receive my sayings has a judge; the word that I have spoken will be his judge on the last day” (John 12:48). The book of Revelation presents a vivid pictorial image of this saying when it speaks of the Word of God, also called Faithful and True, seated on a white horse, with the armies of the saints following him: “From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations ... On his robe and on his thigh, he has a name inscribed, King of kings and Lord of lords” (19:15–16). It is the sword of the Spirit, the word of God⁷ (cf. Ephesians 6:17), which, according to the letter to the Hebrews, is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (4:12).

The Our Father is itself, of course, a Scriptural text (Matthew 6:9–13), but perhaps we have become too familiar with it to appreciate its depth and all its resonances. The following chapters look at each line through the lens of the whole of Scripture. The pure light, so to speak, is refracted into many colours as the different themes underlying the prayer emerge; their inter-weaving produces the beautiful tapestry which is our faith. For indeed, a great part of Christian doctrine is implied in the Lord’s Prayer, as well as direction for Christian living and a piercing examination of conscience.

The texts are to be read slowly, with the eyes of the heart and pondered there. It is an exercise in *lectio divina*, that absorbing reading of Scripture which is already prayer. As St Teresa of Avila pointed out,

⁷ Cf. Scott Hahn, *The Lamb’s Supper* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2003), p. 134.

praying the Our Father can become a means of experiencing pure contemplation and union with God.⁸ Having the Scriptures in our mind and heart as we pray can help bring this about.

In his commentary, Pope Benedict draws out some further implications. Pointing out that in St. Luke's version the Our Father is placed in the context of Jesus' own praying, he continues:

Jesus thereby involves us in his own prayer; he leads us into the interior dialogue of triune love; he draws our human hardships deep into God's heart, as it were. This also means, however, that the words of the Our Father are signposts to interior prayer, they provide a basic direction for our being, and they aim to configure us to the image of the Son. The meaning of the Our Father goes much further than the mere provision of a prayer text. It aims to form our being, to train us in the inner attitude of Jesus.⁹

The prophecy in Isaiah below is primarily understood as referring to Christ, the Word which goes forth from the Father's mouth to earth in the Incarnation and returns in glory at the Ascension, having accomplished the Father's will. Yet it can be fulfilled in us too, as we respond to the Holy Spirit speaking to each of us individually through the sacred Scriptures. May we cherish this divine word ever more deeply, finding there the living and loving presence of God who calls us to himself.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and return not thither but water the earth
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose
and prosper in the thing for which I sent it (Isaiah 55:10–11).

⁸ St Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, 30.

⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* (London, New York and Berlin: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. 132.