



"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

Elgin, Moray, Scotland IV30 8UA
DBH Series No 36 - March 2007

"What page, what passage of the inspired books of the Old and New Testament is not the truest of guides for human life?" Holy Rule 73:3

"God, the inspirer and author of the books of both Testaments, in his wisdom has so brought it about that the New should be hidden in the Old, and that the Old should be made manifest in the New [from St. Augustine: 'Novum in Vetere latet, et in Novo Vetus patet.'] For, although Christ founded the New Covenant in his blood, still the books of the Old Testament, all of them caught up into the Gospel message, acquire and show forth their complete meaning in the New Testament and, in their turn, shed light on it and explain it."

From "Dei Verbum", the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of Vatican II, n. 16.

Monastic Voice

The successive books of Holy Scripture should be diligently committed to memory and ceaselessly reviewed. This continual meditation will increasingly renew our mind, and the face of Scripture itself will also begin to be renewed for us, so that the beauty of a more sacred understanding will somehow grow with the person who is making progress. For its form is also adapted to the capacity of the human intelligence. It will appear as earthly to carnal persons and as divine to spiritual persons, such that those to whom it previously seemed wrapped in thick clouds will be unable to grasp its subtlety or endure its splendour.

John Cassian (360-430), Fourteenth Conference, on Spiritual Knowledge, n. XI.

I saw a hand stretched out towards me, holding a rolled up scroll. It then spread out the scroll before me, and I saw that it was written on within and without (Ezk 2:9). The scroll given to Ezekiel represents holy Scripture. It was rolled up, since the words of Scripture are often obscure. Because of their profundity they are not easily understood by everyone. But the scroll is then spread out before the Prophet, because holy preachers are able to reveal the hidden meaning of Scripture to the faithful. Truth Himself opened out this scroll when *He opened their understanding so that they could understand the Scriptures (Lk 24:45)*. The scroll was written on within and without because scripture has a literal or historical sense and a spiritual or allegorical sense. The writing "without" is the plain sense of the letter, attainable by the weak. The writing "within" is the spiritual understanding, given only to the strong. It is "within" because it promises invisible things, and speaks of heavenly realities, whereas what is written "without" is visible and earthly. Therefore the Psalmist said: *The high mountains are a refuge for the stags, and the rock for the hedgehogs (Ps 103:18)*. Those who can already make the leap of divine contemplation are able to attain the mountain heights of spiritual understanding. But we little ones are more like the hedgehogs who find refuge in the rocks, for we are covered by the spines of our sins, and so unable to understand profound truths. Nevertheless, we are safe in the haven of the Rock: that is, we are saved through our faith in Jesus Christ. For that reason St. Paul told some people: *I did not consider myself to know anything among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified (1 Cor 2:2)*. Or in other words: Because I did not think you could grasp the mysteries of His divinity, I spoke to you only about His human weakness.

St. Gregory the Great, Pope from 590-604: Homilies on Ezekiel, Bk 1: IX:29

It is very right and proper that we should hear the scriptures read during the Eucharist or during the Liturgy of the Hours. St. Benedict himself commends this practice, where he speaks of *listening readily to holy reading* (HR 4:55). I do not think, however, that this is sufficient on its own. For one thing it is not easy for us moderns to do it properly. We are conditioned by a culture which relies heavily upon the written word and upon visual media, so we are not good listeners. The passivity and docility involved in listening to a text being read quickly tends to indifference and distraction. The Scripture readings which make up the Liturgy of the Word easily go in one ear and out of the other, unless a skilful preacher focusses attention upon them in his homily. There are rich mines of ore in the Scriptures, but they need to be worked at quite hard. There are buried treasures, but they need to be dug up. None of this happens, as a rule, if we merely listen to Scripture readings in a passive sort of way. If we really want to get to grips with the inspired word, to make it our own, we need to sit down and work at it for ourselves. There is no substitute for this. At first it is quite hard going, but with practice it becomes easier and more natural. As the Scriptures become part of us, as we come to respond to them readily and see their relevance to ourselves, then they also have more meaning for us when they are read out in Church. The Liturgy of the Word, instead of being something we doze through, becomes an effective preparation for the sacramental mystery which follows.

Dom Cyprian Smith OSB: The Path of Life (1995), chapter 6: Lectio Divina

Dear oblates and friends,

I'd like in this oblate letter to offer a lectio divina reflection, focussing on how the Paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection is in accordance with the Scriptures of the Old Testament. Each Sunday we proclaim in the Creed: *On the third day he rose again, in accordance with the scriptures*. That line is a direct quotation from St. Paul, writing to the Corinthians (1 Cor 15:4-5). St. Paul there repeats himself to emphasise the point: *Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures ... and on the third day he was raised to life, in accordance with the scriptures*.

All that is very familiar, but it's far from straightforward. Because there is no text at all in the Old Testament saying that a future Messiah will die and rise again. Indeed there seems to have been no expectation of that happening among the Jews of the time: not even among Jesus' closest followers. One of the reasons the two disciples on the road to Emmaus were so dismayed by Christ's death is that, as they said, they had thought he was the Messiah: but his death seemed to show that he couldn't be. And it is only in the latest books of the Old Testament that we find any clear belief in life after death at all. The official party within Judaism, which controlled the Temple worship, explicitly denied this belief.

There are, it is true, several rather obscure texts in the Old Testament which have traditionally been viewed by Christians as prophecies of the resurrection on the third day. The Prophet Hosea says that he has struck us and *he will bind up our wounds; after two days he will revive us, and on the third day he will raise us up* (6:3). The prophet Jonah, we read, spent *three days* in the belly of the fish (Jonah 2:1, cf. Mt 12:40), and it was *on the third day* that God revealed himself at Sinai and gave the Ten Commandments as a sign that Israel was to be his own holy people (Ex 19).

In addition, Christ's suffering and death can be seen as foreshadowed in various Old Testament passages. We think especially of Psalms like 21/22, or 68/69. A passage which seems most clearly to spell out Christ's sacrificial suffering for our sins is Isaiah's fourth "Song of the Servant" (Is 52:13-53:12). Here, as elsewhere, we can read allusions, if we will, to the Resurrection: but at best they are vague hints, difficult of interpretation, and even of uncertain textual authority.

In the book of Acts, we read how the post-Easter and Pentecost Apostles applied Old Testament texts to Christ's death and Resurrection. They did so in accordance with conventions of scriptural interpretation commonly accepted among the Jews of the time. But none of these texts would convince a sceptical modern reader. All of them are lifted out of their original context, and made to carry a meaning they did not originally have. For example, Psalm 16:8-11, quoted in Acts 2:25, originally referred simply to the Psalmist escaping death, in order to live a little longer in this world.

*Starting with Moses and going through all the prophets, he explained to them the passages throughout the scriptures that were about himself.... He opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them: 'So you see how **it was written** that the Christ would suffer and on the third day rise from the dead' (Lk 24:27; 45-46).*

How we wish St. Luke had told us exactly what Jesus said then! Which texts did he explain? What exactly did he say about them? But Luke is silent here: and I think with good reason. If all were as clear as day; if Christ's death and resurrection somehow fulfilled Old Testament prophecy in a mechanical way; if we could simply read texts predicting the events, then see the events occurring: we would be very much the losers. It's actually good for us to go ourselves through the process which the first Christians went through, and which all subsequent generations have gone through: the long and often difficult work of searching the scriptures; the gradually dawning understanding; the sudden insights; the joyful realisation, at the deepest level, that God is perfectly consistent with himself; that he has done all things well; that Christ really is the answer, and the key; and that what God has done throughout salvation history makes perfect sense, and is all for our good, and his glory. This process is not primarily a business of acquiring information, but of being receptive to the Holy Spirit. When we read Holy Scripture, we ask the Spirit to open our minds and touch our hearts, and show us there the face of Christ. As the Council said (DV 12), it is only when we read Scripture *through the same Spirit by which it was written*, and bear in mind its profound interior unity, that we can hear what God is saying, personally, to us through it.

I want to suggest here one way into the interpretation of the Old Testament. According to this view, Christ's death and resurrection is found not just here and there, in this or that obscure detail, but everywhere, and throughout. We reach this conclusion, not because it's perfectly obvious, but because it fits with how God always tends to work. Always we find God bringing his purposes to completion as if bringing life out of death. One day he would crown his work by entering into this pattern of death and Resurrection himself.

We who read the Old Testament in the light of Christ are not guilty of imposing an alien meaning where none originally existed. In God's plan, Christ comes first. So everything that went before must ultimately be in relation to him, and he sheds light on everything, backwards as well as forwards. A powerful sign of that occurs at the Easter Vigil. After the singing of the Exsultet, the Paschal Candle, symbol of Christ's resurrection from the dead, is placed beside the lectern. In this way, not only the Gospel and epistle, but all seven readings from the Old Testament are proclaimed in its light.

The New Testament writers constantly refer to the Old Testament. Indeed in the first generation of the Church, before the New Testament was even written, the Old Testament was the only Scripture, and it formed the basis of all the Apostolic preaching, including to the gentiles. It's important for us to grasp that this is the way God chose to unfold Christ's mystery to us. Therefore, if we would understand better, and enter into this mystery more fully, it's the way we have to follow.

So I propose now to run briefly through the Old Testament, noting how in signs and shadows it continually looks forward to Christ's Paschal Mystery, and how that in turn casts its light back on the Scriptures that foreshadowed it.

We start at the beginning of Genesis, with the two accounts of **Creation**. God brought light out of darkness, and a living man out of the mud of the earth. From mere "waste and void" God made something wonderful and astonishing, and he saw that it was good. That's the sort of thing God does. It was the first, primordial sign of God bringing life out of death. Why did God create in this way? Why was creation not always simply there? Surely because this way is better: it shows forth more clearly God's power and glory and goodness, and it gives us greater cause to praise him for his mighty works.

But then **the Fall** happened, and it all went wrong. Sin and division and alienation entered in, and there was murder and death, defeat and failure. All of that, we know, is the cause of and reason for Christ's death. But it is also a *sign* of Christ's death. Why did God allow this catastrophe to happen? It seemed to defeat his plan, to nullify his original blessing. Then at the Flood God even seemed ready to destroy entirely what he had made (Gn 6:6). But no: the blessing continued. After the Flood it was even increased through a covenant, though now only through a chosen righteous one, Noah, and his descendants (Gn 9:9).

Why did God act in this way? Perhaps we glimpse something of the reason through the experience of joy when something is lost and then found: more joy by far than there would have been had it never been lost (cf. e.g. Lk 15). So God manifested his unbounded goodness and mercy more clearly after the Fall, and after the Flood, than if all had simply always been well. And already here we see a *sign* of Resurrection, of new and better life with God, coming out of death.

Time passed, and to prepare for himself a consecrated people, who would be more fully able to receive his promise and blessing, God called **Abraham**. Abraham was so old that Scripture says that he was “*as good as dead*” (Hb 11:12). Yet, against all hope or expectation, he was blessed with a son, Isaac, the father of the chosen people. Again, here we see life, brought out of death: not just the same life either, but new, better life, because now lived in a new covenant with God. Yet we are troubled. Why did the promise reach only so few? And why was it only of children and of land? Surely for so great a God the promise was somehow not big enough: not sufficiently complete or satisfying or all embracing?

Then as we read at the Easter Vigil, Abraham was asked by God to **sacrifice Isaac**. God seemed to demand the return of the very gift he had given: to nullify his promise by demanding the death of its sole heir. Yet, because of Abraham’s obedience, the gift was even increased with a yet wider blessing (Gn 22:17-18). Out of the jaws of death came a new and better life. What I want to suggest here, is that this not only reflects, but somehow *calls for* Christ’s death and resurrection. Isaac was not actually sacrificed. So a supreme act of perfect obedience, a perfectly acceptable sacrifice of the most valuable possible gift, did not actually occur. And later, Isaac died a natural death. God’s covenant with his chosen people remained therefore somehow incomplete, not yet definitive: begging, as it were, a greater, more perfect fulfilment. That fulfilment, that completion came with Christ. His sacrificial death effected forever a perfect reconciliation between all of sinful humanity and God. And in Christ’s Resurrection, God’s original blessings and promises acquired their true, limitless scope: nothing less than the communication to all of God’s own divine and eternal life.

Before leaving the Book of Genesis, let me just refer to the delightfully told **story of Joseph**. When Joseph was thrown into the well (Gn 37:24), and later when he was thrown into prison by Potiphar (39:20), he too was as *good as dead*. But he was raised up, in order that through him, his own people, and the peoples of the whole known world, might be saved. There are plenty of stories like that in the Old Testament. But I want particularly to quote here something Joseph said to his brothers, because it helps us to understand God’s typical way of working. *The evil you planned to do me, he says, has by God’s design been turned to good* (Gn 50:20).

Joseph here put into words a principle, which applies not just in this case, but throughout Scripture, and in our world, and in our own lives. *God allows evil in order to draw a greater good out of it*. In Christ’s death God allowed the supreme evil to occur, in order to draw out of it, in his Resurrection from the dead, the supreme and definitive good.

We come now to the defining event in the history of Israel: the **Exodus** from Egypt, and particularly the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea (Ex 14). The story begins with Pharaoh’s decree that all Hebrew male infants be thrown into the River. In the Jewish imagination, water was always a symbol of chaos and destruction. The baby Moses was duly cast into the Nile, but he was raised up out of the water in order to become the saviour of his people (Ex 2:3). Under the leadership of Moses, then, Israel was led from slavery to freedom; from an alien land to its promised home. The people were led, as it were, through death, represented by the Red Sea, to new life, represented by God’s gift to them of his law and covenant. And again we can see these events as a sign of life brought out of death; of God being true to his promise beyond all hope or expectation. In these events God showed his readiness to forgive sin: to re-create Israel’s broken relationship with himself. But again we ask: was the Exodus enough for so great a God? It was after all only one event in the past, not directly affecting later generations. Could it have been God’s final word? No: it was only an anticipation and preparation. It showed the sort of thing God does; the sort of God he is: a God of love, of fidelity, of surprising miracles. In the fullness of time it was to be completed, superabundantly fulfilled, in the death and resurrection of Christ.

The principal sign of the covenant God made with his chosen people after the Exodus was his gift of the **law**. This required Israel to worship God through the **sacrifice of animals**. Moses specified in great detail how and why this was to be done. The blood of animals was poured out in atonement for the sins of the people, and as a sign of communion with one another and with God. But as the letter to the Hebrews insists (Hb 10:4), bull’s blood and goat’s blood cannot actually take away sins. The very fact that these sacrifices had perpetually to be

repeated shows that they were never quite effective. The prophets too, frequently declared that animal sacrifices are never enough, even though they are what God has commanded (cf. e.g. Isaiah 1:11-17).

We know that the death of Christ put an end to any need for animal sacrifices. Yet we understand that they “fit” with what happened on the Cross. Ultimately it is Christ’s sacrifice that explains and gives meaning to the sacrifices of animals, and not vice versa. Yet they truly foreshadowed what was to occur, and they help us understand it. For Christ poured out his blood in order effectively to wipe away our sins. In addition, Christ perfectly answered the *moral* concerns of the Law and the Prophets. For he enabled those who belong to him to live henceforth in newness and true uprightness of life, through the power released at his Resurrection, and through his outpoured Spirit. In this way he established the communion with God which the law of Moses pointed towards but could never achieve. What he did is thus *in accordance with the scriptures*, but as it were, better than the scriptures: deeper and more wonderful than the Jews of old could ever have dreamed of. For in Christ we no longer worship God in symbols or shadows, but in Spirit and in truth (Jn 4:23).

We pass now to the long and often sordid history of the **Kings of Israel**. The great majority of these Kings were unfaithful to God: many of them quite grotesquely so. The foreboding of Samuel about the monarchy as a whole (1 Sm 8:6) certainly seemed justified by the event. Yet even in the darkest times, the sense was never lost that their Kings somehow represented the people to God, and God to the people. Even if the King forsook the ways of God, and even if it seemed God had abandoned the King, the people clung on to the promise made through the prophet Nathan (2 Sm 7:12). Through Nathan, God promised that David would one day be succeeded by a great and ideal heir (cf. also Ps 88/89). Through this Son of David, the communion between God and his people, damaged through sin, would be forever restored.

Then in 587 B.C. the Babylonians captured Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, deported the people and brought the Davidic monarchy to an end. Thus began the **Exile**: a sign indeed of death, and death explicitly as a result of sin. Had the prophets not warned, again and again, that this would happen? Once again, it seemed that God’s plan had been frustrated; his covenant with Israel brought to nothing. But once again, the sign of death would be followed by a sign of Resurrection.

In the event, the Exile provoked a purification of Israel’s religion, and a new flowering of prophecy. God’s people needed to go through this experience, and their hope in God’s promises not only endured, but increased. They looked forward to the **return from exile** as to a new and better Exodus; to the rebuilding of the Temple, to the coming of a Messianic King, and to a renewal of the Covenant (cf. esp. Jer 31:31ff.) They did return from exile, and they did rebuild the Temple. New life with God did rise again after this death. Yet how far short of the prophecies it all fell! The second Temple was only ever a pale shadow of the first. Israel never recovered political independence, and the Davidic monarchy was never restored. Nevertheless, the prophecies stood. If they had not yet been fulfilled, the Jews firmly believed that they would be in God’s good time. And so they were. In Christ’s Resurrection we see how *those whom the Lord has ransomed return, their heads crowned with joy unending, and sorrow and sighing take flight* (Is 35:10). In the Christ’s Body the Church we see how a new Temple has been built *more glorious than the former one* (Haggai 2:9). In Christ, the victorious King, we see how *an everlasting rule that is never to pass away* has been established, for *his kingship will never come to an end* (Daniel 7:14). And in Christ’s blood we have a new and everlasting covenant, renewed in every Mass (Lk 22:20).

It remains now to consider the **Wisdom books** of the Old Testament. For the most part, these were written in the centuries immediately preceding the time of Christ. It’s easy enough to see how the late Jewish understanding of Wisdom can be applied to Christ, whom St. Paul refers to explicitly as God’s Wisdom (1 Cor 1:24). They portray Wisdom as somehow identified with God, yet also distinct from him (cf. e.g. Proverbs 8:22-31). Foreshadowing the Prologue of St. John’s Gospel, the Wisdom writers speak of divine Wisdom coming to dwell among men, particularly through the gift of the law. It’s less obvious to see how Christ’s death and Resurrection is “in accordance with” these books. But again, I think that if we look at them very broadly, we can see how it (alone) perfectly fulfils their deepest concerns and expectations.

The Wisdom books contain passages of exalted poetry and sublime theological reflection. They also have quite dull sections of conventional moralising. The sages who produced this literature were concerned above all with the problem of how to live aright: how to maintain a right relationship with God. Vice and folly, they proclaim, lead only to destruction. But we ask: is it enough to live an outwardly respectable life, more or less in conformity with good sense? Can that make us right with God? St. Paul wrestled with this problem, and reached a bleak conclusion. *Not a single one of them is upright, not a single one is wise, not a single one seeks God* (Rm

3:10, cf. Psalm 14/13). In Paul's terms, the sages, like Moses, like the Prophets, demanded, but could not give us, the *grace of justification*. That comes only through Christ's death and resurrection: towards which, therefore, the wisdom literature, with the rest of the Old Testament, inevitably points.

I conclude with the **problem of innocent suffering**. It crops up in many places in the Old Testament, but receives its sharpest focus in the book of Job, which is firmly set within the Wisdom tradition. For the pagan peoples, innocent suffering posed no theological problem. They imagined their gods to be fickle, vindictive, cruel; often even at war with one another. Justice was scarcely to be expected from them. But the Hebrews believed in a God who is perfectly just, perfectly good, and also all-powerful. So why do the wicked prosper, and the innocent suffer? The pious Jewish answer was that the wicked will come to a bad end, and the good be rewarded, in this life. All suffering must somehow be a punishment for sin, and prosperity a reward for virtue. Job clearly saw the inadequacy of this solution, and he railed against it. What is remarkable is that, even though God's actions baffled him, he never for a moment lost his faith in either the goodness or the omnipotence of God. With Job, the Jewish religion was content to live with this unsolved conundrum. Then one day the time came when the perfectly innocent One suffered to the most extreme extent. Three days later, both his innocence, and God's power, justice, goodness and mercy, were superabundantly vindicated. In Christ's Resurrection from the dead, Job was answered. His story now made sense. Suffering was turned into glory, sorrow into joy, the apparent triumph of evil into the definitive triumph of good. Justice and mercy were reconciled, and the result was Life with God.

If we can read the Old Testament in this way, we can also get used to reading the pattern of Christ's death and resurrection into our own life, and into the world we live in. It's easy to see reflections of Christ's death, wherever there is suffering of any sort, or injustice, or sin, or sadness or grief. But we also glimpse Christ's Resurrection, whenever there is forgiveness and reconciliation, wherever goodness and life and joy prevail, wherever what is bad is unexpectedly and against all hope turned into something wonderfully good. Always in this process Christ is present, even if often he is hidden. The Holy Spirit whispers his truth in our hearts, and we try to cultivate the interior dispositions necessary to catch his voice. Like the disciples at Emmaus, we have to ask Jesus to open our minds ever more fully, that we might understand his mystery, and discern how and why it is appropriate for things to be the way they are. With Cassian and St. Gregory, when Christ's truth and presence are revealed to us, we experience spiritual joy. Whether his "newness" is clearly manifest or hard to discern, we know it's always there: "*latet*". One day we know it will appear as clear as day: "*patebit*".