



# Celebrating, living and sharing God's word



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*The Bible cannot be just the heritage of some, much less a collection of books for the benefit of a privileged few. It belongs above all to those called to hear its message and to recognise themselves in its words. At times, there can be a tendency to monopolise the sacred text by restricting it to certain circles or to select groups. It cannot be that way. The Bible is the book of the Lord's people, who, in listening to it, move from dispersion and division towards unity. The word of God unites believers and makes them one people.<sup>1</sup>*

It is the skill of any musician to move their hands and fingers simultaneously and consecutively to bring to life the beauty of the composer's work, allowing it to be heard and fully appreciated. The musician translates the notes on the paper to sounds in the air for the music to tell its story. This two hands partnership could be used to illustrate that partnership between Bible Society and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. For the last 12 months we have collaborated to make the Bible sound fresh in our communities through The God Who Speaks campaign.

Like any musical piece this initiative has its movements – fast and slow, pianissimo and fortissimo, themes and variations, cadenzas and improvisations, fugues and counterpoint. All to the purpose of making the Bible be that underlying score in the lives of our Christian communities. Like a good musical score or soundtrack, it describes and gives atmosphere to the story being told through interpretation and meaning. These enhance the storyline and would be missed if not

there. The storyline is, of course, life's meaning and journey of each one of us before God, and in God.

## Inspiration

The inspiration for The God Who Speaks campaign lies in the 1,600th anniversary of the death of St Jerome and the 10th anniversary of the Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (The Word of the Lord) by Pope Benedict XVI. I would want to add the 400th anniversary of the first complete edition/translation of the Bible into Welsh, following the foundational work of Bishop William Morgan (1545–1604). Sadly, he never saw his 1603 completed work published as the publisher's text was lost in the Great Plague in London. Finally published in 1620, Bishop Morgan's version was used in Welsh churches until 1988.

St Jerome (340–420) was born in Strido, Dalmatia. He studied in Rome and was baptised there. Being attracted by the ascetic life, he travelled to the East, where he was reluctantly ordained a priest. Pope Damasus recalled him to Rome to be his secretary. Following the death of Pope Damasus in 384 Jerome returned to the East, to Bethlehem, where with the help of St Paula, he founded a monastery, a hospice and a school, and settled down to the most important work of his life. Jerome's translation of the Bible into Latin from the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek is a work that with some revisions, is still in use today. Additionally, he was the author of many works, including letters and commentaries on Holy Scripture. His lifetime was filled with turmoil in the world and in the Church, yet through this all he was

## NOTES

1. Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter *Aperuit Illis*, 30 September 2019.
2. Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 30 September 2010. N. 1.
3. *Ibid.*, N.5.
4. *Ibid.*, N.124.
5. *Ibid.*, N.123.
6. Pope Francis, *Angelus*, 27 July 2014.
7. *Verbum Domini* N.73.
8. *Ibid.*, N.73.
9. Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, N.27.
10. *Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments* 29 June 2014.
11. *Aperuit Illis*, N.3.
12. *Ibid.*, N. 15.
13. Pope Francis, *Scripturae Sacrae Affectus*, Apostolic Letter on the 1600th Anniversary of the death of St Jerome, 30 September 2020.
14. *Scripturae Sacrae Affectus*.
15. E.g. many schools and dioceses have been engaging with the Bible in creative and innovative ways, from Bible study craft days, St Jerome's lion storytelling and Scripture soundbite videos, to Bible art competitions, Scripture detective trails and Window on the Word parish photo shoots.

a true pastor helping refugees and those in need. He died at Bethlehem.

The Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* is Pope Benedict XVI's response and teaching document with recommendations arising out of the 12th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, meeting in the Vatican from 5–26 October 2008, whose theme had been 'The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church'. The Synod was itself, in the words of Pope Benedict, a 'profound experience of encounter with Christ, the Word of the Father, who is present where two or three are gathered in his name (cf. Matthew 18.20)'.<sup>2</sup>

## Theme and variations

Since the late 1870s and the pontificate of Leo XIII there had been a growing awareness of the importance of the Word of God and the study of the Bible in the life of the Catholic Church. This reached a new pitch at the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) with the promulgation of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* (Word of God) generating revived interest in the Word of God in the life of the Church, the theological reflection on the divine revelation and to the study of Sacred Scripture. Pope Benedict, picking up on the experience of encounter referred to above, speaks of his desire for the work of the Synod 'to have a real effect on the life of the Church: on our personal relationship with the Sacred Scriptures, on their interpretation in the liturgy and catechesis, and in scientific research, so that the Bible may not simply be a word from the past, but a living and timely word'.<sup>3</sup>

*Verbum Domini* continues that process of assimilation and lays out the principle themes of the place of the Bible in the Church's life and mission. First, the very fact of biblical revelation; the God who speaks and invites our response, and the nature of the relationship that engenders and the faith it inspires. With that faith which is the key, the Church is able to interpret the Bible authentically – the faith and the interpretation are in harmony and provide the correct understanding. Secondly, *Verbum Domini* sets out the word of God and the life of the Church in her liturgy and formal worship, sacramental celebrations and preaching, the inspiring of pastoral activity, formation and private prayer in all of the faithful: ordained, religious, and lay, especially in family life. Thirdly, Pope Benedict addresses the issue of the mission of the Church to bring the Word of God to the world not just by proclaiming it in itself, but through its proclamation in the social issues and cultural settings of today's world, as well as in the ecumenical and interreligious dialogue in which the Church engages.

His closing words are a prayer that,

*'every day of our lives ... [may] be shaped by a renewed encounter with Christ, the Word of the Father made flesh: he stands at the beginning*

*and the end, and "in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1.17) Let us be silent in order to hear the Lord's word and to meditate upon it, so that by the working of the Holy Spirit it may remain in our hearts and speak to us all the days of our lives. In this way the Church will always be renewed and rejuvenated, thanks to the word of the Lord which remains for ever (cf. 1 Peter 1.25; Isaiah 40.8).'<sup>4</sup>*

Pope Benedict has spoken of the joy that comes when by the power of the Holy Spirit the divine word enters into us and bears fruit for eternal life. Joy that is to be shared, for 'By proclaiming God's word in the power of the Holy Spirit, we also wish to share the source of true joy, not a superficial and fleeting joy, but the joy born of the awareness that the Lord Jesus alone has words of everlasting life (cf. John 6.68)'.<sup>5</sup>

## Fugue and counterpoint

Within three years of the promulgation of *Verbum Domini*, Pope Francis had been elected Pope. It was apparent from the very beginning of his pontificate that he saw the need to make the words of that Apostolic Exhortation a living reality in the Church and world, proclaiming the place and importance of the Gospels and the Bible as a whole in the life of the individual and the community. He used his weekly General Audiences on Wednesdays in St Peter's Square, as well as the Sunday Angelus Message, to promote the reading of the Sacred Scriptures by saying: 'Everyone should carry a small bible or pocket edition of the gospels and should find at least a few minutes every day to read the word of God' (June 2014) and a month later, repeating the importance of reading a passage from the Gospel every day; of keeping it in our pockets, our bags, always at hand, as 'everything makes sense when you find this treasure that Jesus called "the Kingdom of God": that is, God who reigns in your life, in our lives. God is love, peace and joy in every man and in all men ... Reading the Gospel means finding Jesus and receiving this Christian joy, which is a gift from the Holy Spirit'.<sup>6</sup>

The message of *Verbum Domini* was not one for the individual alone, but for the Church community in all its aspects. '[T]he Synod called for a particular pastoral commitment to emphasising the centrality of the word of God in the Church's life, and recommended a greater "biblical apostolate", not alongside other forms of pastoral work, but as a *means of letting the Bible inspire all pastoral work*'.<sup>7</sup> This was first formulated by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* (N.24) with the purpose of not adding another layer of meetings to pastoral activity, but rather to make 'the Bible the inspiration of every ordinary and extraordinary pastoral outreach [which] will lead to a greater awareness of the person of Christ, who reveals the Father and is the fullness of divine revelation'.<sup>8</sup>

In October 2012 some six months before Pope Francis' election in March 2013, bishops from all the countries of the world gathered in Rome for the 13th General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to take place in the Catholic Church. This time on the subject of 'New Evangelisation' – to reflect upon a rediscovery of personal encounter with Jesus and engage with renewed vigour in the mission of spreading the joy of the gospel and becoming spirit-filled evangelisers. Pope Francis responded to the Synod proceedings with his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel) in November 2013. In it he sought to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelisation marked by the joy of those whose hearts and lives have been filled with their encounter with Jesus and that as the basis of 'the renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion'.<sup>9</sup> That Synod and this Exhortation are but one application of the biblical apostolate called for in 1965 and from which came the *Homiletic Directory*.<sup>10</sup> The first part of the Directory is concerned principally with (1) the place of the word of God in liturgical celebration and, (2) the principles of Catholic biblical interpretation.

It is against this whole contemporary background that the celebration of the two anniversaries was placed. During the spring and early summer of 2018 initial plans were drawn up, and by the autumn were presented to Bible Society and the Plenary Meeting of the Catholic Bishops' Conference. Both accepted the proposals and a celebration campaign to inspire, animate and facilitate the dioceses and parishes in England and Wales in a greater and yet more innovative use of the Scriptures in daily life was born, with the title *The God Who Speaks*. It was to begin on the feast day of St Jerome (30 September) 2019 and run through the liturgical year 2019–20.

## Pianissimo and fortissimo

Launch events included Cardinal Vincent Nichols speaking from the National Gallery, London, about the painting of St Jerome and St John the Baptist by the Italian Renaissance artist Masaccio; the production of 60,000 copies of St Matthew's Gospel for distribution across the Catholic community as well as a special edition for prisoners; the creation of a distinctive website [www.godwhospeaks.uk](http://www.godwhospeaks.uk) to carry Bible related articles in culture, music and art, prayer and liturgy resources; resources for schools; formation resources and much more. Since that graduated launch, a huge amount of content has been added to the website. This in part due to the ever-increasing involvement and demand by schools and dioceses. The campaign was never intended to be top down, but an omni-directional exploration and sharing across England and Wales. The project was given two further fillips by Pope Francis; one, right at the beginning when on 30 September 2019 he gave the Church the Apostolic

Letter, *Aperuit Illis* (He opened their minds) which draws on Nehemiah 8.3 and Luke 24.45. In this Letter the Pope instituted the 'Sunday of the Word of God' to be observed annually on the Third Sunday of Ordinary Time in the Catholic liturgical calendar. Falling as it does in the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity it deliberately 'has ecumenical value'.<sup>11</sup> This short letter of Pope Francis gave timely endorsement to The God Who Speaks initiative at its outset for what he said was exactly what the campaign was committed to seeking to do, namely to 'help God's people grow in religious and intimate familiarity with sacred Scriptures (cf. Deuteronomy 30.14)'.<sup>12</sup>

The second fillip came this year on the anniversary itself in the Apostolic Letter, *Scripturae Sacrae Affectus* (Devotion to Sacred Scripture)<sup>13</sup> in which Pope Francis writes of St Jerome's 'living and tender love' for the written Word of God which continues to inspire us in an age when, 'Sadly, the richness of Scripture is neglected or minimized by many because they were not afforded a solid grounding in this area. Together with a greater emphasis on the study of Scripture in ecclesiastical programmes of training for priests and catechists, efforts should also be made to provide all the faithful with the resources needed to be able to open the sacred book and draw from it priceless fruits of wisdom, hope and life'.<sup>14</sup> It is to provide at all levels of the Church that 'solid grounding' in the Scriptures that the campaign has worked for and continues to do so. This, like so much else in the last nine months, has been curtailed by the coronavirus pandemic, or more correctly had to change direction and emphasis. Covid-19 has affected hundreds of national and diocesan initiatives and events; diocesan Scripture tours that had been planned for venues across the countries have had to be postponed; the wonderful and remarkable mosaic art work commissioned specifically for the campaign entitled 'Little Bits of God' by the artist Pete Codling, has yet to be seen in its full splendour by most of the dioceses, albeit there are two videos of its creation and completion on our website. Like so much else, we have found new ways to continue the work of the initiative which is now to run until the Sunday of the Word of God 2022.

## Cadenza and improvisation

What the lockdowns and coronavirus restrictions have taught us is that the word of God is not to be silenced. Indeed, it is quite the opposite. This is especially true at the diocesan and local level where our network of Scripture Champions have used our resources and opportunities to explore a continued involvement by groups as well as individuals of ways of celebrating, living and sharing God's word.<sup>15</sup> The coronavirus has thrown light on areas of life that may well have been overlooked in a time of health and growing prosperity, and has provided the opportunity to bring the healing, redeeming, and hope-inspiring word to our world as it is today.