

Reflections by Fr James Downey OSA

(Note from the Editor: Fr Downey kindly agreed to my suggestion that he compose an article for the *Beda Review* regarding his several decades of teaching at the College and submitted a wonderful reflection which is too comprehensive for inclusion in the printed version of the magazine. The *Review* therefore contains the first few pages of the article to whet the appetite of the reader, with the full text now available here at the Beda website. Fr Downey's thoughts are both entertaining and edifying and deserve a wide readership, for which our thanks to him).

INTRODUCTION

As I look back on my time at the Beda, the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins come to mind. Hopkins was reflecting on his time in Dublin in a letter to Robert Bridges (17 February 1887). He began: "Tomorrow morning, I shall have been three years in Ireland, three hard wearying wasting wasted years...In those I have done God's will (in the main) and many many examination papers."

To be clear, I do not see myself in that first sentence. It only serves to remind me of how much more fortunate I was. I spent much longer at the Beda than a paltry three years, though it may have felt like three years. That is because those years were anything but "hard wearying wasting wasted years." Well, "wasted"? That's not for me to say! But even if it is true, I can say only that I had a good time wasting my time.

But that second sentence does ring a bell. Hopkins does not say whether he appended any 'helpful' comments to those examination papers. Perhaps not, wisely realising that such comments would likely have been cheerfully ignored and promptly forgotten. I did not show such restraint. I am more easily provoked

Indeed, it is difficult not to be provoked by essays which looked like the Lough Ness monster, to borrow an image from the late Canon Bill Anderson, who in 1996 won *The Times* sponsored Preacher of the Year Award (the only time it was won by a Catholic). He knew what he was talking about when he inveighed against homilies which resemble the Loch Ness Monster in that they "have a beginning, then a middle, a middle, and a middle, and the tail-end is a long-time-a-coming". And there was the occasional essay whose author seemed "more confused and confusing than a drunk driver negotiating Spaghetti Junction in the rush hour"

Having more than once come face to face with the Loch Ness monster, I tended to invoke the Dale Carnegie prescription: Tell the audience what you're going to say; say it; then tell them what you've said. I wish I had a euro for every time I sounded off about the importance of a brief, focused introduction. Let me practise what I preached.

My brief, at the suggestion of the editor, is to reflect on the changes which have taken place in the teaching of Scripture over the years that I have spent at the Beda.

But the changes should be seen in the context of what has remained constant over the years. One should therefore begin by noting what has not changed – apart from the Loch Ness monster, which regularly surfaced over the years.

THE BEDA'S ABIDING SPIRIT

Old fogies tend to pepper their farewell speeches with a good deal of fake modesty. One of the more common such professions at an institution such as the Beda is the claim that they learnt more than they taught. But I tend to be more cynical. Yes, there were some things that I did learn at the Beda. I did not know that the words “do not be afraid” occur 365 times in the Bible. At a certain time of the year I would hear some very creative variations on “The dog ate my homework”. And there were the inevitable howlers which, even if they did not exactly contribute to the grades of the candidate, did add to the gaiety of nations – at any rate of the examiner!

But the Beda is not defined by its academic programme. It is wider than what is taught or what is learnt. It is more than a sum of those who do the teaching and those who do the learning.

Homo Ludens

George Orwell described the BBC as somewhere between a girl's school and a lunatic asylum. Obviously I do not know whether that is a fair assessment of the BBC. But it strikes me that it could serve as a pretty accurate metaphor for the Beda. Unlike Orwell, however, who did not have much time for the BBC, I mean it as a compliment!

Take the average girls' school, or even your average seminary. Students are all of roughly the same age. They all have the same intellectual background. They have all reached the same standard of education. If the numbers warrant it, they may be divided into groups of roughly the same intellectual ability. They may even all dress the same.

None of that is true of the Beda. They come from widely differing age groups. They certainly do not have the same educational background. They have very different personal histories, which might be even more interesting were the thumbnail autobiographies in *The Beda Review* not written with such discretion. They are bound by different social mores. They come from quite diverse cultural backgrounds, more noticeable now than in earlier times. On any given day, the Beda can look like a miniature United Nations.

This situation is hardly normal. It is, if one is thinking of forging a community, is a recipe for chaos. But it works. Here lies the difference with the United Nations who occupy a skyscraper in New York, but only for offices. Whatever unity obtains there is a nine-to-five type of unity. Indeed the word “United” probably reflects an aspiration rather than a lived reality.

The Beda therefore is best described, not as a United Nations, but as a lunatic asylum. The lunatic asylum too contains individuals from all sorts of backgrounds. They are united by the fact that they are all moonstruck (to give a proximate etymology of the word). The common factor in the Beda is that they are “struck” by another heavenly being. How about the Holy

Spirit? This time those thumbnail sketches in *The Beda Review* are more revealing. I think it is fair to say that there is in general, though to varying degrees, a conscious awareness of having been struck by the Spirit – and somehow ending up at the Beda. Professional theologians might not agree, but for my money this is one of the proofs of the existence of the Holy Spirit.

A collection of individuals such as this is not supposed to work – at least not like a normal institution. And yet the Beda works with the efficiency and precision of your traditional girls' school run by nuns. Lectures begin on time because punctuality seems to be taken for granted. (It is true that there is the occasional laggard who bustles in with a flustered look and generally in a state of confusion. But you will find that it is always the same person, and he is probably at the Beda only because he forgot to turn up at his own wedding.) Beda liturgies are a joy because, without any hint of fussiness, everything seems to purr over with a well-oiled rhythm. The same is true of the dining room, especially one of those festive occasions (and they are not rare). The Beda has nothing to learn from even the classiest of Roman restaurants, nor from those prim masters of ceremony at papal liturgies.

All of this has a lot to do with the unobtrusive work of those officials who, if I am not mistaken, took office on the feast of St Bede every year. The official in the classroom was typical. In the days before the smart board, he ensured that chalk and a duster was available. If you wished to change the time of a lecture, it was simply a matter of consulting him and it somehow happened. He arranged exam timetables. He ensured that you, the examiner, had the relevant information. He managed to dragoon his classmates and you could bet on it that, five minutes before the appointed time, each candidate was dutifully lined up at the door of the examination hall – and that included the chap who forgot to turn up at his own wedding. I suspect he (the class official, not the groom *manqué*) would even have conducted the examination if you allowed him.

The classroom, the dining room, and the chapel – and I speak only of the areas with which I had a passing familiarity. And it is not as though the Beda had a large pool from which to draw in selecting officials.

On the other hand, there is no mistaking what I have described for an institution run, for example, by the Legionaries of Christ, with lots of fresh-faced, well groomed, and earnest young men with dog-collars and in double-breasted jackets. I cannot imagine myself in the room of a Legionary rather late in the evening, casually dressed and quaffing whiskey on the rocks. That is one of my earlier memories of the Beda. I do not recall what the occasion was, but we guests – well, everybody – had been wined and dined in the Beda tradition. When I thought it was all over, a small group of students thought it would be a good idea if we adjourned to Paddy White's room. Paddy, who would later be ordained on his deathbed by Cardinal Hume, kept the whiskey flowing and, to be honest, I no longer recall how it all ended.

When teaching Scripture – and not just in the Beda – I would find myself, every so often, being dragged into other fields. You might see characters like Aristotle, or Plato, or the Stoics looming ominously in the horizon. Or you might have to explain such deep philosophical questions as the immortality of the soul, Zoroastrianism, etc. The trick on such occasions is to pretend to an expertise you do not really have. One such topic that seemed to rear its head

was a philosophical movement called Epicureanism. Fortunately, I had examples to hand, which I might not have found in more austere, correct establishments. But in the Beda there were the “celebratory meals” and the “bar nights” and the “mid-term breaks”, which seemed to dot the timetable with considerable regularity.

At the beginning of each semester, the Dean of Studies provided a detailed timetable of coming events. As an external lecturer, you had to keep a close eye on those mid-term and twixt-semester breaks. I am no longer sure if there is a difference. But they did have one thing in common – they seemed to occur when everybody else in Rome was working. So, unless you were attentive, you could, having negotiated the Roman rush hour, find yourself at the Beda facing an unaccustomed silence and empty classrooms. You had discovered too late that the Beda was celebrating a term break, and that the average student had availed of the opportunity to hie himself off to exotic places.

Then there was the notice board. It is certainly true that on the days when I had lectures at the Beda, I religiously kept an eye on the notice board, out of curiosity rather than necessity. There was always interesting information about different things happening, people being conferred with one ministry or another, sundry visitors, distinguished or otherwise, passing through, etc. But such occasions invariably seemed to be marked by a “celebratory meal.” I thought I had seen everything until the day of my final exam at the Beda. On such occasions, if I could not finish the evaluation work before lunch, I would remain on, as a matter of convenience, for the meal. On this occasion, I strayed innocently into what I found is called the Leavers’ Lunch! And I thought I had seen everything.

One former rector of the Beda – and I have been there long enough to have gone through several rectors – at the end of the liturgy would recommend transitioning “seamlessly” to the next stage. The next stage was the dining room, or at least the *aperitivi* which softened you up for the dining room. The chapel, the dining room, the classroom: there did indeed seem to be a seamless transition, due I think to that pervading spirit.

In a word, the Beda seems to be a jolly place, where nobody seemed to take themselves too seriously. The fancy name for this particular philosophy is eutrapalia. And it is of course a very Catholic thing. I recall that Hugo Rainer SJ (brother of Karl) wrote a book about it called *Man at Play*. You don’t really have to know too much German to realise that the original title for the work is preferable: *Der spielende Mensch*. It is certainly closer to the Latin, *homo ludens*. The subtitle to Rahner’s book is “Did you ever practise eutrapelia?” I have never seen eutrapalia as a topic in the Beda academic programme. That may be because the Beda student is by nature a *homo ludens*! Or, if German is your thing, he is a *spielende Mensch*.

Another thing I noticed at the Beda was that some seemed to participate in the Seven Churches Walk. They will have heard that the practice goes back to Philip Neri, who saw it as a way to counteract the raucous excesses of Carnevale. Philip’s walk also had a carnival aspect about it. But that was typical of Philip, who was after all a jolly individual. “A joyful heart,” he said, “is more easily made perfect than a downcast one”. Should he perhaps be a second patron of the Beda?

Homo Sapiens

But let us leave, at least for now, the *homo ludens*. Let us turn instead to the *homo sapiens*, which might be seen as a more appropriate term for the Beda student and for its existing patron. The Beda student is a character of some complexity. Not only is he a *homo ludens*, he is also a *homo sapiens*. Let us see if that is true, though, by definition, we shall confine ourselves to Biblical studies, which is admittedly but one dimension of the *homo sapiens*.

At the outset let me say that there is one constant over the thirty odd years since I first set foot on the Beda (that was in 1985). I am prepared to wager that every one of my courses over those years began with a reading from Heb 4:12-13. That's the bit about the Word of God being alive and active more than any two-edged sword...

That's the sword principle, which has guided me even before I was first inflicted on generations of Beda students (for life, also in my case, does not begin at the Beda). Let me explain, since the term is likely to be more familiar to readers of the evangelical persuasion. Evangelicals, who know their Bibles, apparently had a game which they called "sword drills". It was designed to reward the child who was first to locate a given verse in his/her study Bible. That was their way of making the Word alive and active.

The average Catholic would not do well at the sword drill. I would acknowledge however that there was always the occasional Beda student who would have done very well. In this regard, I would consider myself very much an average Catholic. Let me say immediately, therefore, that I do not use the sword drill in the evangelical sense. If that sort of knowledge of the Bible ever made sense, it has long since been superseded by the concordance and makes little sense in the age of Google.

I use the sword principle in a very different sense. Indeed, I prefer to keep to the sense of Heb 4:12. This sense is very much the focus of the teaching of Benedict XVI, especially in *Verbum Domini*, the post-synodal apostolic exhortation on the word of God. There he gives a special section to the sacramentality of the word of God. The word is not merely informative but "performative". "The sacramentality of the word can thus be understood by analogy with the real presence of Christ under the appearances of the consecrated bread and wine" (DV 52). Later in the document, Benedict quotes the well-known and, in this regard, very significant words of Jerome: "ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ" (DV 73). Likewise, there are the words of Benedict XVI on Sept. 16, 2005 to 400 participants in the international congress on "Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church":

The Church knows well that Christ lives in the Sacred Scriptures. For this very reason -
- as the Constitution stresses -- she has always venerated the divine Scriptures in the
same way as she venerates the Body of the Lord (cf. "*Dei Verbum*," n. 21)

The sword principle, in other words, is a matter of engaging with the living word rather than an ability to identify its source.

But this is hardly the time for Catholic complacency, as though we were more favourably situated than our evangelical friends. It is merely that in the matter of the sword principle we have different problems.

In our case, the problem is what one might call the Moby Dick paradox. D. H. Lawrence may have called the novel “one of the strangest and most wonderful books in the world”. But on this side of the Atlantic the great American novel is vaguely known and little read.

Needless to say, it is different in America. Or is it?

I recently read an interview given by Tom Hanks, who will be familiar to the average movie buff. “Have you read Moby Dick?” Hanks sheepishly asked Gaby Wood, the journalist interviewing him. “It took me forever to read Moby Dick,” he continued. “I was one of those guys who pretended I had read Moby Dick... I didn’t read it until I was like 50 years old.” (Hanks in an interview with Wood at the Southbank Centre’s London Literature Festival 2017).

One might say that the Bible is to Catholics (including the average Beda student?) what Moby Dick was to Tom Hanks. Ronald Knox, the catholic convert and *inter alia* Bible translator, was also a popular preacher. In his 1949 book, *On Englishing the Bible*, he recalls his impressions of an average parish.

In my experience, the laity’s attitude towards the Bible is one of blank indifference, varied now and again by one of puzzled hostility. The clergy, no doubt, search the Scriptures more eagerly. And yet, when I used to go round preaching a good deal and would ask the pastor for a Bible to verify my text from, there was generally an ominous pause of twenty minutes or so before he returned, banging the leaves of the sacred volume and visibly blowing on the top. The new wine of the Gospel, you felt, was kept in strangely cobwebby bottles.

It is true Knox was speaking of English Catholics of the 1940s. It is also true that the Biblical landscape has changed in the meantime. But there is one conclusion which is self-evident. It goes without saying that the Word of God will never become alive and active (Heb 4:12) if it remains enshrined like a fossil on the seminarian’s bookshelf. This has a ripple effect. The seminarian/priest will no doubt turn out to be a caring pastor. But one will have to look beyond the caring pastor if the laity are to be aroused from their “blank indifference” or “puzzled hostility” to the Bible.

One might say, then, that, while the Beda represents a friendly environment for the *homo ludens*, this is probably less true for the *homo sapiens*. It bears repeating that I speak only of Scripture, and only of the ‘Catholic’ student. The Beda has had a regular sprinkling of students from non-Catholic backgrounds. But they rarely turned up at my lectures, on the assumption that there was nothing I could tell them that they did not know already.

One is not unsympathetic to the dilemma of the incoming Beda student. His knowledge of the Bible is on a par with Knox’s parish priest. There is the added problem that his academic background may be spotty, and he is hardly ready for turgid lectures on Scripture. Indeed, academic lectures can be counterproductive. Instead of inspiring a love for the Word, they may well serve to inoculate against it.

The conscientious lecturer will try to address this problem, perhaps by turning to modern classroom techniques. There are lots of helpful suggestions as to how one might spruce up the lecture.

I recalled one of my modest efforts in this regard when Bob Turner, now a semi-retired priest in Milwaukee, reminded me of a piece of doggerel I had used in a course on Wisdom Literature (and many will probably agree that a course on Wisdom does need to be sexed up – as Tony Blair is alleged to have put it). It went like this:

King David and King Solomon
Led merry, merry lives,
With many, many lady friends
And many, many wives.
But when old age crept over them
With many, many qualms,
King Solomon wrote the Proverbs
And King David wrote the psalms.

When I asked him if he remembered anything else from the course, Bob cheerfully replied in the negative. Could it be that modern pedagogical methods are not all they are played up to be?

But there are other ways of reaching out to the student under duress. I recall once participating at an academic staff meeting (not in the Beda) at which this problem was discussed. Someone reminded the meeting of one of those unwritten rules found in most environments: *Roma è generosa*. It means that, at examination time, Roman institutions tend to be generous in assigning grades to students under stress.

There is, I am sure, something to be said for this, but I tend to belong to the ‘tough love’ school of thought. Otherwise we are in the territory of *Alice in Wonderland* where the verdict of the Dodo reigns: "Everybody has won, and all must have prizes."

But even if one were inclined to the Dodo principle, the examiner at the Beda does not have a choice. For one thing, there is the second examiner breathing down your neck. The second examiner in turn is, like the first examiner, thinking of that team from St. Mary’s which turns up at the end of each semester. They go through exams, oral as well as written, with a fine comb. Or if they don’t, they certainly give that impression. Which amounts to the same thing. There is no room at the Beda for Dodo professors.

The result, if you are a Beda student, is that everybody does not win. But they do win a prize of a different sort. They have a guarantee that their work has been evaluated by professional standards. These standards are controlled by a third party, in this case St. Mary’s. And institutions like St. Mary’s know that their survival depends on maintaining standards. So, at the annual graduation ceremony, when a St. Mary’s official confers a degree or diploma, one can be confident that it is not a fake certificate. It does what it says on the tin. It is perhaps less certain that other Roman institutions can be equally confident.

Mark Twain is alleged to have said that he never let his schooling interfere with his education. He meant that a diploma from St. Mary's represents a guarantee that the recipient has successfully completed his schooling. It does not necessarily follow that he has been educated.

One of my memories at the beginning of the daily lecture (I liked to have the first period and successive deans of studies kindly indulged me where possible) is of students filing in, not exactly with shining morning face, but impressively burdened with various tomes. I recall in particular that huge door-stopper on Canon Law, not to mention other less bulky but equally impressive volumes, depending on the topic for the second period. But I noticed that very often there was one item conspicuous by its absence. I tried to deal with the problem in a perhaps typically Roman way: I decreed that coming to a Scripture lecture without a Bible was a mortal sin. With the advent of information technology, things were more difficult to control. But perhaps it was a lost cause from the beginning.

In any case, to apply the Mark Twain principle to Biblical studies, schooling means having a working knowledge of the lecturer's notes, education means developing a personal engagement with the text of the Bible.

This dichotomy would already be unhealthy even if it were confined to the academic level. But the problem is more infectious and is not so easily quarantined. By way of illustration let us take three snippets from *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, the 1992 pastoral exhortation on seminary formation.

An essential element of spiritual formation is the prayerful and meditated reading of the word of God (lectio divina) (PDV 47).

In reflecting maturely upon the faith, theology moves in two directions. The first is that of the study of the word of God: the word set down in holy writ, celebrated and lived in the living tradition of the Church, and authoritatively interpreted by the Church's magisterium. Hence the importance of studying sacred Scripture "which should be the soul, as it were, of all theology" (PDV 54)

The whole training of the students should have as its object to make them true shepherds of souls after the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, teacher, priest and shepherd. Hence, they should be trained for the ministry of the word so that they may gain an ever - increasing understanding of the revealed word of God, making it their own by meditation and giving it expression in their speech and in their lives (PDV 57)

The three quotations come from the sections of *PDV* entitled respectively "Spiritual Formation", "Intellectual Formation" and "Pastoral Formation". One can therefore, at least in theory, distinguish three roles for the Bible in seminary formation: at the spiritual, at the intellectual and also at the pastoral level.

It is legitimate therefore to speak of three different aspects of the Biblical apostolate. It is not justifiable, though it is tempting, to compartmentalize the three areas, as though there were no interaction between them.

One does not have to look too closely at that third quotation to realise that that is but another version of the old Latin adage: *nemo dat quod non habet*. One cannot give what one does not have. In the present instance, one cannot engage in the “ministry of the word”, one cannot be a “teacher” of the word, *without* first “making it their own by meditation and giving it expression in their speech and in their lives’.

Briefly, while one may theoretically distinguish three different levels, in fact all three are organically intertwined. The health or otherwise at one level impinges on the whole.

To return to the Mark Twain metaphor, schooling is not enough. A candidate who is well-schooled in one Biblical course or another can be relied on to provide the correct answers. Of itself however this is not a guarantee that the candidate is educated in the material in question. It does not follow that he/she has assimilated the material. Without such assimilation, it is difficult to see it will seep out when the candidate moves to another level, be it spiritual, academic or pastoral.

These reflections, which are based *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, could be endorsed by other church documents both before and after *PDV*. Sufficient to note that the above quotations from *PDV* are themselves consciously reliant on earlier church teaching. The third quotation, on the pastoral dimensions of biblical spirituality, is a quotation from *Optatum Totius* 4. When *PDV* says that Scripture should be “the soul of theology”, that particular expression also comes from OT 16. Now *Optatum Totius* is the Vatican II decree on priestly training published by Paul VI in 1965.

One would therefore expect that seminary programmes since Vatican II have been inspired by the proposition that Scripture is the soul of all theology. A quick survey of its academic programmes over these years will confirm that the Beda is no exception.

So, irrespective of how biblically literate the new Beda seminarian is, there is a system in place which is geared to producing a well-rounded theologian, for whom the Bible is the soul of theology. That system has been tested and refined over the years by different deans of studies, under the watchful eye of, most recently, St. Mary’s University, Twickenham. For this Beda authorities have reason to be proud and those who have studied there have reason to be grateful.

So, all is well in the best of all possible worlds. Or is it?

Let me digress. We live in an age of increasing specialization. Most of our information is second hand. But, unless you are a luddite, it all works out rather well. Come to think of it, though the Information Age may be perplexing, who wants to be without the iPad or the Satnav?

I recall the comments of one author, though I no longer recall the person’s name. He made the point that indeed second-hand information serves us well. If you want to cook parsnips, or treat your ulcer, or raise chickens, where would one be without second hand information? But, he noted, there is one place where second hand information will not do. He was of

course referring to matters of faith. There is no such thing as second hand 'faith' in a second-hand God.

The second-hand principle applies also to the Bible. The study of Scripture is not like raising chickens. It is not merely a matter of following instructions. It is more than attending lectures and faithfully taking notes.

Here lies one of the built-in hazards of even the best run institutions of learning. And it would be foolhardy to ignore that institutional hazard. I refer to the danger – and let us confine ourselves to the Bible – that the Graduation ceremony at the beginning of the academic year is a celebration of what is merely second-hand knowledge.

Let me illustrate with that old chestnut. It has been said that the lecture is the perfect instrument for moving knowledge from the lecturer's brain to the student's notes without ever passing through the student's brain.

I would be inclined to add a couple of other steps to the process. From the notes, it passes on to the *memory* (emphasis added) of the student – perhaps on the night before the examination. From there it is relayed to the examiner on the dreaded day. After all the average examinee has a fairly straightforward rule of thumb: guess what the examiner is thinking.

I would be inclined to add a final step in the process. After the knowledge is relayed to the examiner, it is, with a sigh of relief on the part of the candidate, consigned to relative oblivion.

So the knowledge has come full circle. It has done so, it might be added, to the satisfaction of all concerned: the candidate because he has graduated to the next level, the examiner because it 'proves' the course has been a success! But it is chastening to remember that, in the process of transmission, the knowledge has made only a brief stop-over at the memory (not the mind) of the student!

This of course is a caricature. And one is not saying that this is true of all graduates. Neither is one saying that students are the only ones at fault.

Let me tell you about the frog.

The average Beda essay writer will perhaps have been guided by Thurabian, the author of a widely accepted handbook on these matters. An earlier work of the same genre, which may still be in use, was *Elements of Style* by E.B. White which, like Thurabian, went through various editions. Be that as it may, White had this to say in his preface to *A Subtreasury of American Humor* (1941):

Humour can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind

Many would say that this is an accurate description of Biblical scholarship. It has reduced the Bible to an esoteric subject of interest only to the experts. In the process, the Bible has

become the exclusive terrain of the exegete, with the ordinary reader effectively excluded, a modern version of the Bible (in Latin) being the exclusive domain of the clergy.

One cannot exclude that there is sometimes an anti-intellectual strain running through such criticisms. But the critique contains an element of truth which is ignored at one's own peril.

There is a very real danger that the living word (Heb 4:12!) can be so dissected that, like the frog, it no longer has life. In spite of the enthusiasm of the expert, it has effectively become a dead letter.

It is not as if the church has not recognised this. For example, there is the pithy expression, paralysis by analysis, which epitomises the problem just referred to. The expression is to be found, for example, in the document *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, which acknowledges the problem in question. The Beda graduate or the now busy pastor, on the other hand, may not remember the proverb or may have relegated it to the nether regions of his consciousness. It is more likely that he will remember the experience, as he wrestled with abstruse topics with enigmatic titles, sometimes in foreign languages.

Perhaps after all a certain type of student is correct: guess what the professor wants to hear and get on with life. Go through the motions during the analysis stage. But keep one's perspective: what is important is the spiritual and pastoral, while the academic impinges at best marginally on the other dimensions of the ministry.

Yes, indeed, there is more than a grain of truth in this. There is such a thing as paralysis by analysis, and lecturers ignore it at their peril, or more seriously at the peril of their students. But, as always, things are not so simple.

As one assesses the situation, one should be wary of what might be called the Curé d'Ars syndrome. The reference, needless to say, is to St. John Vianney (1786-1859) who is of course the patron of parish priests. The basic outline of his story is well known: a highly successful pastor, he would not have done well at Beda exams and one suspects that his Beda essays would have been the proverbial dog's dinner. He certainly was not ticking all the boxes. But all of this was compensated for by his piety.

And so, one occasionally – perhaps even more than occasionally – one hears the prescription for the future of the church: what we need are holy priests.

That is of course true. Indeed, it is rightly regarded as a basic principle of seminary formation and continues to be endorsed by church documents. Pope Francis is typical (audience 26 March 2014):

The Bishop who does not pray, the Bishop who does not listen to the Word of God, who does not celebrate Mass every day, who does not go regularly to Confession, and the same for a priest who does not do these things - in the long run they lose their union with Jesus and become a mediocrity which does no good to the Church.

But the call to holiness should not be seen in an exclusivist sense. The Curé d'Ars syndrome tends to have anti-intellectual undertones. It may even be that it serves to camouflage something less edifying. During his chrisom homily this year (29 March 2018), the Pope managed a not too subtle dig in the ribs to priests: "When people say of a priest, "he is close to us", they usually mean two things. The first is that "he is always there" (as opposed to never being there: in that case, they always begin by saying, "Father, I know that you are very busy...") ..."

But there is also something one dimensional about this particular syndrome. In that regard, it is worth noting that the fifth chapter of *Pastores Dabo Vobis* highlights four dimensions of seminary formation: human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral.

But the gnostic tendencies of the Curé d'Ars syndrome is something for another day. In the present context, one is concerned with one of the casualties of the syndrome. This one-dimensional concept of holiness runs the risk of devaluing some of the other dimensions. Keeping to the terminology of PDV, one should note the inherent danger of devaluing the intellectual

It would be too easy to interpret this flight from the intellectual as an escape route on the part of the over-burdened, or perhaps the less enthusiastic, seminarian. But that is perhaps not the full story. Like all sciences, Biblical studies has developed its own scientific terminology. Obviously, this serves a useful, indeed essential, purpose. And indeed, as time goes on, one learns to live with such terms as literary forms, historicity, mythology, perhaps even hermeneutics.

But how about semiotic analysis, *Relectures Wirkungsgeschichte*.. You'll find the lot – and much more – in the 1993 document on Biblical interpretation. The frustrated student might be forgiven for saying that here we are the realm of rocket science!

In the interests of sanity, the argument goes, it is more prudent to beat a retreat and leave such matters to the experts, not forgetting, needless to say, to put in a performance at exam time. From there it is but one small step to letting the expert dictate the meaning of Sunday's gospel.

Did I mention rocket science? Scott Kelly is an American astronaut who a few years ago hit the headlines for having spent 'a year in space' (well, 11 months and 3 days actually). Obviously, an ideal candidate for the lecture tour. But there was one thing he was not expecting. "I've been surprised by one of the things I've heard from audiences: that they believe science is too difficult, too complex for a normal person to comprehend" (*Time* 4 April 2018).

A reaction that, I suspect, the average lecturer in Scripture has heard, practically word for word, over and over again.

But Kelly notes that, when he was at school, it was his twin brother (also an astronaut) who got the A's. Kelly on the other hand spent his time, on his own admission, looking out the window and daydreaming. But then he read a book about the early American trailblazers in

space travel. This became his obsession and inspiration. He realised that, if he were to achieve his aim, he needed to master maths and science, and, as they say, the rest is history.

Like Kelly, the scholar's key obsession is to reach for the stars. Come to think of it, however, that may not be the best metaphor for the Word of God, which is described as follows in the Book of Deuteronomy (30:11-14):

For this Law which I am laying down for you today is neither obscure for you nor beyond your reach. It is not in heaven, so that you need to wonder, "Who will go up to heaven for us and bring it down to us, so that we can hear and practise it?" Nor is it beyond the seas, so that you need to wonder, "Who will cross the seas for us and bring it back to us, so that we can hear and practise it?" No, the word is very near to you, it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to put into practice.

As with Kelly, the scholar may not be enamoured by the 'maths and science' part of the equation. But this is not an end in itself. It is but a tool to facilitate the main obsession, which is the Word of God.

As I write, the official at the Vatican press office has been jumping through hoops as he tries to explain that Pope Francis did not really deny the existence of hell. It is a bizarre situation where papal pronouncements are presented through the lens of a 93-year-old journalist, who prides himself in not taking notes and not using a recorder and who is also a professed atheist.

Well, bizarre problems deserve bizarre solutions. The Pope should have taken the equivalent of the Beda course on Apocalyptic literature. I speak only half in jest.

I realise that sounds pompous – or even worse. But I certainly would not wish to suggest that a course at the Beda represents a panacea.

Let me quote a proverb from Wisdom Literature:

I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill, but time and chance happeneth to them all.

You will find it in Qoheleth 9:11, but you will also find it in your Dictionary of Quotations. That means that it is not only attractive, but it is also self-explanatory. After all that is what you would expect from a proverb worthy of the name.

So why does Orwell quote it in his *Politics and the English Language*? He visualises what might have emerged if an academic were asked to explain the proverb:

Objective considerations of contemporary phenomena compel the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account

Well, that's a lot of abstract nouns for a single sentence! It is of course intended to be a caricature. But it is not very different from an average sentence in – to take one example – *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. It is the type of sentence which, in Orwell's words, uses "language as an instrument [not] for expressing [but] for concealing thought."

In any case, it is worth noting that one of the hazards of academia is the excessive use of jargon which "conceals" more than it "expresses". The field of Biblical studies is not immune. Though it may not be much consolation to the bewildered listener, the problem may lie at the other side of the podium where the lecturer is happily cruising in automatic pilot

It is perhaps unfair to single out *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. It is true, as already noted, that IBC contains more than its share of abstract nouns and jargon of the type that would inspire the wrath of Orwell. But IBC contains a section entitled "New Methods and Approaches", and academic jargon seems to be the lingua franca of these approaches. But that brings us to the next section

THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN'

Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis (the times change, and we change with them). There is some truth in this particular nugget of wisdom, well known at least in its English version. And no, it is not from the Book of Proverbs! It is thought to be derived from Ovid, a Roman poet from the Augustan period.

Jacob Rees-Mogg MP, an avowed Catholic and prominent Brexiteer, is sometimes referred to as "the Right Honourable Gentleman of the Nineteenth Century". Ironically, he has become a bit of a media sensation. Even more ironically, he was reported last year as having opened a Twitter account! His first tweet: *Tempora mutantur, et nos mutamur in illis*. He didn't provide the translation!

Now if the Right Honourable member from the nineteenth century says so, it is must be true that the times they are a-changin'

It is time in other words to reflect on the second part of my brief. How has the teaching of scripture changed over the years? And there have been changes over what is a relatively short period of time.

I have already referenced the church document entitled *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. It was published in 1993 and contains a section on "New Methods and Approaches". Some of the names may be a tad forbidding. But for the moment it is sufficient to note both the number and perhaps the complexity of the changes.

In an earlier age, this is the point where the 'dear reader' would be forewarned of trouble to come. This is the point where one attempts to navigate the shoals of Biblical hermeneutics and tries to steer the neophyte between the Scylla of fundamentalism and the Charibdis of postmodernism.

But that looks like the equivalent of root canal surgery without an anaesthetic! Readers of the *Beda* magazine deserve better. So let us try another approach.

Steven Pinker, in reference to the Enlightenment, says that it is not like the Olympics with opening and closing ceremonies. In the present instance, one could of course begin with my first appearance at the *Beda* (1985) and end with my final exam (2018), cataloguing the changes as they took place in the intervening period.

My time at the *Beda* is bookended by two documents from the Pontifical Biblical Commission: *The Historical Truth of the Gospels* and *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. I speak in general terms. In fact, the first document was published in 1964 about 20 years before I set foot on the *Beda*, while the second document was published in 1993, somewhat more than 20 years before I took my final leave of the *Beda*.

It hardly needs to be said that these are not the only relevant church documents for the period in question. They are not necessarily even the most important. But they do serve to highlight different stages in the teaching of Scripture over the period under discussion.

I would like to suggest three different stages, which may be illustrated by the following questions:

1. What happened?
2. What does it mean?
3. What does it mean to me?

But perhaps one should speak, not so much of different stages, but rather of different emphases. It is not as if one can put dates on each of these stages, as one might do with the Battle of Hastings or Vatican II. For that matter the three questions might be said to trace the progress of a student's biblical formation over 4 years at the *Beda*.

What Happened?

The title of the 1964 document, *The Historical Truth of the Gospels*, clearly places the emphasis on what happened. But the title also contains the implication that perhaps the historical truth of the gospels (not to mention other books of the Bible) is being questioned.

It goes without saying that Judaeo-Christianity is a historical religion. For Christians Jesus is obviously a historical figure and the paschal mystery is a historical event. It is therefore surely important to ask what happened. There are, in the language of the academy, certain foundational events.

But that is not the full story. There is for example the old chestnut, the seven days. If one may judge by a sampling of Catholic commentaries, it is no longer an issue. But that is not to say that it is not an issue for the occasional Catholic in the pew (should that be the average Catholic?). It is certainly an issue for Creationists who go to great lengths to show that creation in seven days is scientifically tenable.

And then there was the student in a Roman institution, not the Beda, who felt strongly about the story of Jonah. He had brought his scientific knowledge (I do not recall his area of expertise) to bear on the issue and concluded that there was nothing implausible about an individual surviving in the belly of a sea creature. He had written a book on his findings, though I do not recall that it made the Amazon list.

It is easy to dismiss the creationist or the Jonah expert as fundamentalist. More technically, one might argue that the Genesis story belongs to the category of Near Eastern mythology and that the Jonah story “is told with undisguised irony quite alien to the writing of history. The book is intended to amuse and instruct; it is a didactic tale, and its doctrine marks one of the peaks of the Old Testament (that is how it is described in the *New Jerusalem Bible* 1189).

But might it then not be that the virgin birth is also a myth and the resurrection story a *theologoumenon* (don't ask what that means)?

In other words, it is easy to toss around the word ‘fundamentalist’ as a term of abuse. It is an epithet which should be used with caution, not only out of respect for others but also because it can be so easily visited upon ourselves as a term of abuse!

Israel Folau is an Australian rugby union footballer. He is also a paid-up member of The Assemblies of God church and reads the Bible every day. In April 2018, in answer to a specific question, he gave expression to his belief that homosexuals will go to hell (cp. 1 Cor 6:9-10). It does not require too much imagination to visualise the public reaction. The reaction of Australian Jesuit, Richard Leonard, was a little more measured. He suggested it might be wiser to leave the eternal fate of homosexuals to the God of mercy. He further noted that Folau is generously tattooed. Herein lies a flaw in Folau's case. His views on homosexuality can certainly be said to have a biblical basis (Lev 20:13). But it seems to have escaped Folau that only one chapter earlier the Book of Leviticus has a longish list of forbidden items. Among them – you guessed it – are the words of Yahweh: “you will not tattoo yourselves” (Lev 19:28). (*The Tablet* 5 May 2018 9).

Leonard concludes: “Fundamentalists shouldn't get to pick and choose”. Or one might put it another way. Asking what happened may sometimes be a tricky question! And not just for fundamentalists.

So how about the virgin birth? Is the gospel narrative historically accurate? What happened?

But could it be that this not only a tricky question. Perhaps it is also the wrong question? Perhaps it is time to go on to the next question.

What Does it Mean?

Let us return briefly to the 1964 document:

Recent studies indicate that the life and teaching of Jesus were not simply related so as to be remembered; they were "preached" to provide the basis of faith and morals for the Church. (under the sub-heading “Consequences for the Exegete”)

The document here makes a clear distinction. On the one hand, there are the sayings and deeds of Jesus which are “related” in order to be “remembered”. On the other hand, there is the “preaching” of the Jesus event as “the basis of faith and morals”

But the document is not content with making a distinction between facts which are remembered and the events which are preached. It declares a preference. The remembering of facts is very much secondary to the preaching of faith and morals.

Thus the exegete, by scrutinizing the testimony of the Evangelists over and over again will be able to illustrate more clearly the perennial theological value of the Gospels as well as the importance and necessity of the Church's interpretation (*The Historical Truth*. under the sub-heading “Consequences for the Exegete”)

In other words, while many feel strongly that it is vital to establish “What Happened?”, it is much more important to know “What Does it Mean?”

In this regard, the final words of the Gospel of John (20:30-31) are pertinent:

There were many other signs that Jesus worked in the sight of the disciples, but they are not recorded in this book. These are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing this you may have life through his name

The evangelist, by his own admission, does not aim to provide a comprehensive account of what happened. Indeed, in the more colourful language of the end of chapter 21, he suggests that he does not really have time for that sort of thing: “There was much else that Jesus did; if it were written down in detail, I do not suppose the world itself would hold all the books that would be written” (Jn 21:25)

The evangelist therefore does not keep a full record of what happened. He is selective in what he records. Even then he does not recount these events for the sake of the record. He recounts them “so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing this you may have life through his name” (20:31)

It is therefore fair to say that, for the Fourth Evangelist, the primary concern was, not so much what happened, as what does it mean.

The problem therefore with my interlocutor on the Jonah problem is not that he is bent on discovering what happened. His problem really lies in the fact that he is so focused on the first question that he never gets round to asking what does it mean.

It would be easy to fall into the trap of getting into the wrong type of discussion with him. I might for example be tempted to invoke the principle of Ockham's razor and say that miracles should not be multiplied without necessity! But then of course he does not claim that the Jonah story is a miracle. His contention is that, though unusual, it can be proved that such a

sequence of events is 'scientifically' possible. Though temperamentally much more cynical, I would not engage him in a discussion on the merits of his argument.

To do so would be a distraction. In the final analysis, the key question would disappear from the radar. I would have failed in my pastoral duty to get my interlocutor to ask the vital question: what does it mean?

It would be easy to dismiss the Jonah enthusiast as a zany individual from the Deep South who is also probably a born-again Christian of questionable emotional balance.

It is not exactly charitable to dismiss anybody out of hand, apart from the fact Pope Francis has felt the need to engage with fundamentalist churches (he even referred to them as churches!). But there is the further fact that the Jonah phenomenon also raises its head at the other end of the spectrum.

Take the case of the outspoken atheist, Christopher Hitchens (who has since gone to his reward!). In his *God is not Great*, he emphatically denies:

that the 4 Gospels were in any sense a historical record. Their multiple authors – none of whom published anything until many decades after the crucifixion – cannot agree on anything of importance. Matthew and Luke cannot concur on the Virgin Birth or the genealogy of Jesus...

I read the book when I received a copy from a friend who in turn had bought it at an airport kiosk presumably with a view to having something mildly serious for flight reading. I have no doubt that there was the occasional reader who, in reading the above, had a kind of eureka moment in mid flight. This was something that had never struck them previously!!

They would have, implicitly at least, concluded that Hitchens had made something in the nature of a major discovery. There is but a short step to a further question: how come that this very obvious inconsistency had not been noticed before. Then the eureka moment continues when it dawns on the reader that something fishy has been going on. The Church! In keeping with her well-known weakness for intrigue, has she not perhaps been hiding something?

Hitchens does little if not to fan this suspicion. His findings cannot be reduced to the rantings of an evangelical atheist. No. They are based on the research of a biblical scholar called Bart Ehrman, who was a fundamentalist Christian before he saw the light! At last sighting, he was an agnostic atheist.

But Ehrman is a respected scholar, though evangelical Christians do not much care for him. But then Evangelical Christians tend to focus on what happened. For other Christians however people like Ehrman, filtered by Hitchens, can be intimidating.

But the fact is that the Christian world did not have to wait for the coming of Ehrman, much less of Hitchens. Hitchens may feel, or may like to give the impression, that he has made a discovery of some proportions. But the issues which he highlights have been around for a

long time. A very long time, in fact. In about the year 400 Augustine (to take but one example) wrote *De consensu evangelistarum*. You may not know much Latin or have forgotten what you did know. But you get the idea.

Augustine wrote to address the problems raised by the Ehrmans and Hitchens of his day (some commentators think it was Porphyry – thanks for asking).

That is not say that *De consensu* can be trotted out to Hitchens fans as a ready-made solution. But the basic ‘problems’ and the principles of an educated reaction remain unchanged.

In a word, it is not only the fundamentalist who asks the wrong question, namely, What happened? There is some irony in the fact that, at the other end of the spectrum, the rationalist focuses on the same question. In both instances, there is need for an expansion of the horizons. It is legitimate to ask what happened. But one must also ask what does it mean.

This serves to highlight the importance of that second question. It shields the believer from attacks from two different fronts, the fundamentalist and the rationalist.

A job well done therefore! But hold on. That would be to forget the phenomenon of the lost sheep.

The lost sheep is of course a well-known, and a well-loved, parable. Part of its attraction must surely lie in the fact that no one needs a boring academic to explain what it means (that question again!). Jesus himself tells us: “there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner repenting” (Lk 15:7). Indeed, it is the first of three parables in Lk 15 (including of course the perhaps even more popular parable of the Prodigal Son) dealing with the same theme. All three are addressed to the complaint of the Pharisees and scribes: “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Lk 15:2).

But take a look at Mt 18:12-14 where Jesus recounts the same parable. Now take a closer look. There is no mention of sinners! In their place there is a reference to the “little ones”. “it is never the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost” (Mt 18:14). Who could these “little ones” be? Presumably they are the “sinners” mentioned in Lk. As so often, however, the answer is provided, not by Lk, but the context in Mt. Thus we find in 18:5: “Anyone who welcomes one little child like this in my name welcomes me”. Jesus is of course using the word also in the metaphorical sense.

The end result is rather striking. We have two gospels with the one parable. The striking thing is not that the two versions are practically word for word the same. That would be due to the Q source (though Q is probably consigned to oblivion after that exam on The Synoptics). What is striking is that the lost sheep in Lk is a reference to sinners. In Mt it is a reference to the innocent. The difference could hardly be more in your face!

In other words, it is not sufficient to ask what does it mean. One must, at least in the case of the Synoptics, ask two questions. What does Mt mean and what does Lk mean?

This is not without importance. Take the busy pastor. And pastors are always busy. They have, as already noted, the word of Pope Francis for that.

Saturday night at the end of a heavy week. And now a homily to prepare. There was not time to look at the readings on Monday! And now he cannot put his hands on the Sunday bulletin! But the curate has some helpful information: the gospel is about the parable of the lost sheep.

Blessed relief! He has a readymade homily on the lost sheep. In fact, he remembers it went down rather well at the time. Besides Pope Francis is forever going on about Jesus' mercy towards sinners.

Not the ideal way to prepare a homily perhaps. But all's well that ends well. Provided the parable is from the Gospel of Luke!

The ending is less happy however if the liturgy prescribes the matthean version of the parable of the lost sheep. Not many will notice, of course. But the fact remains that the role of this particular homilist is to preach, not Pope Francis, not Luke, but the evangelist Matthew.

There is therefore something to be said for asking the question: What does it mean? It may help to broaden the horizons of the fundamentalist – and those so inclined. It may help one to engage with the rationalist. But, perhaps most importantly, it is essential to the arsenal of the busy preacher. He should never leave home without it!

But weapons have a notoriously limited life span. Does a time come when the armoury needs to be replenished and updated? That brings us to the next question.

What Does it Mean to Me?

“In the meantime, this methodological spectrum of exegetical work has broadened in a way which could not have been envisioned 30 years ago. New methods and new approaches have appeared, from structuralism to materialistic, psychoanalytic and liberation exegesis”

These are the words of the then Cardinal Ratzinger in the Preface to IBC. They refer to the new approaches to biblical exegesis during the second half of the 20th century. In fact, of course, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* was published by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1993 precisely to address these “new methods and new approaches”

Ratzinger concludes the Preface with a clear endorsement of the document.

I believe that this document is very helpful for the important questions about the right way of understanding Holy Scripture...I hope that the document will have a wide circulation so that it becomes a genuine contribution to the search for a deeper assimilation of the word of God in holy Scripture

The Introduction to the document says of the proponents of the new methods: “in place of the patient toil of scientific exegesis, they think it necessary to substitute simpler approaches”. This will bring a huge sigh of relief to the graduate who had to contend with,

and pretend to understand, such things as deutero-canonical, inerrancy, *Formgeschichte* (which is not even English), etc. Such a one will consider "the patient toil of scientific exegesis" very much a euphemism!

So what's new. What are these "simpler approaches"? What "contribution" do they make towards "a deeper assimilation of the word of God"?

Let the document speak for itself. This is how the document explains one of the new methods, Semiotic Analysis (which perhaps may not sound much of an improvement on *Formgeschichte*):

The logico-semantic level. This is the so-called deep level. It is also the most abstract. It proceeds from the assumption that certain forms of logic and meaning underlie the narrative and discursive organization of all discourse. The analysis at this level consists in identifying the logic which governs the basic articulations of the narrative and figurative flow of a text. To achieve this, recourse is often had to an instrument called the "semiotic square" (*carre semiotique*), a figure which makes use of the relationships between two "contrary" terms and two "contradictory" terms (for example, black and white; white and non-white; black and not-black (IBC I B 3)

Got it? Me too. I have to confess that, when faced with writing such as the above, I tend to go Orwellian. Here's what the great man says in his *Politics and the English Language*: "In certain kinds of writing, particularly in art criticism and literary criticism, it is normal to come across long passages which are almost completely lacking in meaning."

That's a relief. But could it be that Orwell is a trifle too harsh? I think it is only fair that everybody should be given the benefit of the doubt (after all, that's what examiners do. Sometimes!). Let us therefore assume that the above quotation from IBC does actually mean something. Let us further assume that, if it does mean something, that something can be explained in plain English.

Is there something in the *carre semiotique*, after all? Here goes.

The Death of the Author

First, let's take a step back. In the discussion of the last sheep, one found oneself asking different questions: what does Matthew mean and what does Luke mean. This, when you think of it, is perfectly normal. Whether it be *The Times* editorial, a term paper, or a papal document, the instinctive reaction is to ask what does the Pope, etc. mean?

The quest of the reader is, according to the jargon, to discover the intention of the author. In order to discover the intention of the author, the reader engages in what the experts call *Redaktionsgeschichte*. This will come as a surprise to the average reader. And there is something to be said for the average reader. After all, in the normal course of events, in order to find the intention of the author it is sufficient to read what the author wrote (though this may not always be true of that term paper!).

All of which – the fancy but forbidding terminology notwithstanding – sounds perfectly normal. After all is that not what communication is about? If the Pope writes an encyclical, he does so in order to keep the church informed about what he intends to say about communion for divorcees, or whatever it might be.

But nothing is ever simple. At least according to the more recent exegetical trends with which IBC is concerned. According to this most recent approach, to identify the intention of the author with the meaning of a text "is to impose a limit on that text". And that is obviously not a good thing! But they go a stage further. The intention of the author is no longer relevant to the meaning of the text!

That rather drastic and perhaps perplexing conclusion is vividly summed up in the expression "The Death of the Author". We have, in other words, come a long way from questions such as "What does Luke mean?"

It is not that that question is no longer asked. We have come to the stage where it is no longer a valid question. Luke is dead and no longer matters. But where does that leave us? In something of a tizzy it would seem! And indeed this is not always easy to follow.

One might begin with the image which is sometimes used. The author is replaced by the reader. Thus to begin with the meaning is created when the author produced the text. But now that the author is 'dead', meaning is created when the reader engages with the text. The reader is liberated from the tyranny of the author.

Hold on, I hear you say. Freedom and liberation is all very well. But is this not some form of private interpretation? Does it not follow that, if the meaning depends on the reader, there will be as many meanings as there are readers? We are, it would appear, in Humpty Dumpty territory:

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things." "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."

Yes, indeed. It is precisely that problem which is acknowledged by IBC. "To admit the possibility of such alien meanings...would also mean opening the door to interpretations of a wildly subjective nature" (II B 1). This is typical of a number of instances where IBC warns against the problem of "subjective" interpretation.

That is a pretty devastating critique. Is this the biblical equivalent of mixed martial arts where there are no Queensberry rules? Is there anything that might be salvaged from this subjectivist free for all? Strange though it may seem, I think perhaps there is.

It is true that, as already stated, this would seem to be a method of interpretation which produces as many meanings as there are readers. But let's take this a stage further, only this time let us confine ourselves to a single reader. By the same logic, it could be said that there are as many meanings as there are readings by that single individual.

Time to pull out your hair, perhaps. But first take your favourite poem, or your favourite piece of music, or maybe even your favourite psalm. Because it's your favourite, you keep coming back to it (or is that it keeps coming back to you?) at all sorts of times. And no two times are exactly the same. You may recite *The Lord in my Shepherd* when you are down in the dumps, or when rejoicing at straight A's at the end of the academic year (an unlikely and perhaps undeserved eventuality), or even in a mystic moment. No two 'meanings' are the same. You keep returning to your favourite work because you have discovered a rich vein whose wealth draws you back again and again. Ps 23 is your Comstock Lode.

It is precisely this that gives meaning to that third question: What does the text mean to me? The fact that the text has no single meaning should not be seen as a limitation. It is rather the liberation of the text.

Dialogue with the Text

From the jargon filled writing of this new movement, one term comes to mind: Dialogue with the Text. It is at least consistent with that other expression, the death of the author. After all, if the author is 'dead', there only remains the reader and the text. And it is of course the reader and the text who are the partners in the dialogue.

Now any dialogue is an ongoing process. The meaning is not confined to a single moment in the process, which is then written in stone. The meaning is something organic, which keeps evolving and being enriched.

There is of course something else about dialogue. In normal parlance, it refers to the interaction between two people. In the present context however it would be a metaphorical term. Well, until you remember that the word of God is alive and active! That's Heb 4:12!!

In this regard, it is perhaps significant that, if I am not mistaken, IBC gives more space to *lectio divina* than any earlier Vatican document.

Be that as it may, I think it is fair to say that the third question does seem after all to be of particular importance: What does the text say to me? Some might say that it is the only question.

It has been said of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* that it was a crime to write it and a punishment to read it! This is probably a typical reaction to Russian literature in general. Names like Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn, etc. trip off the tongue. They could come in useful at a cocktail party (if you did not get round to reading the appropriate handbook on Name Dropping for Dummies). Names of authors such as these may indeed create an impression. But reading their impressive tomes is another matter. And Tom Hanks thought he had problems with *Moby Dick*! The name of Mikhail Sholokhov does not normally find its way into such lists. And yet in 1965 he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. The citation mentions "his epic of the Don", a reference to his most famous work *Quiet Flows the Don*. The work took him 14 years to write – unless you believe some of his critics. Solzhenitsyn

claims that he stole the manuscript from the pocket of a Cossack who had been left dead on the battlefield. Plagiarism once again raises its ugly head.

Be that as it may, the Russians have a saying that one can never read *Quiet Flows the Don* twice. Each re-reading is an encounter with a different book. Ultimately, it matters not a whit whether the work was written by Sholokhov or the Cossack warrior. And academics engage in ponderous disputes as to whether the Fourth Gospel was written by the son of Zebadee, the beloved disciple, an unnamed evangelist – and it goes on!

There is something else that is curious about *Quiet Flows the Don*. As well as the Nobel Prize, the work also won the Stalin Prize! Given the Soviet attitude towards literature (Socialist Realism, etc), this is quite extraordinary, if not unique. But it goes to show that there is something in the work for everybody.

This would appear to raise the profile of that third question: What Does it Mean to Me? Perhaps after all it is the only question

But what about the elephant in the room? There is one issue what will not, and should not, be allowed go away. We refer to the problem of subjectivism. With this exclusive focus on the reader, does it not follow that the meaning of a text is whatever the reader, any reader, says it is?

This is at best messy. Let us see what IBC has to say about it. The following is fairly typical. “No scientific method for the study of the Bible is fully adequate to comprehend the biblical texts in all their richness” (IBC I B). “To absolutize one or other of the approaches taken by the various schools of psychology and psychoanalysis would not serve to make collaborative effort in this area more fruitful but rather render it harmful” (IBC III). “Basically synchronic in nature, it cannot claim to be an independent method which would be sufficient by itself” (IBC I B 1). “No single interpretation can exhaust the meaning of the whole, which is a symphony of many voices” (III A 3)

The point seems obvious – and pretty straightforward. Nothing is perfect, but there is some good in everything. In other words the question, what does the text mean to me, is worth asking. Not because it does not raise problems, certainly not because it discloses a panacea. It is perhaps like the Comstock Lode. There is a lot of sifting to be done. But the gems eventually begin to reveal themselves.

“Catholic exegesis does not claim any particular scientific method as its own” (IBC III). A balanced approach which might serve as a useful *modus operandi*.

The three questions then reflect three different emphases in approaching to the word of God. The questions also reflect in broad strokes three different time periods. They may also serve as a way of illustrating the changes which have taken place in Biblical studies over a period of some 30 years.

It will perhaps be noted from the earlier discussion that there is a certain amount of overlapping between one approach and another. Likewise there is an overlapping of the time

periods. It does not mean that one approach ceased to apply at the end of its time period. It does not mean that one approach replaced another when its time came. The parameters are much less clearly defined. Unless of course you are an ideologue, who believes that the new discovery is what the biblical world has been waiting for and that it now supplants all that has preceded it.

Not being an ideologue, I would tend to the view that the dividing lines between the different stages tend to be hazy. To use contemporary political jargon, one could perhaps speak of soft borders.

The three questions may reflect the intellectual journey of a student at the Beda. He may begin his biblical studies hoping to discover what happened. Gradually it may dawn on him that he should perhaps be addressing the second question. At some point it may be hoped that he will address the third question. If he asks that question properly, it will prove to be an endless task, for the answer is always fresh and refreshing.

Broadly speaking, it is probably true to say that the three questions reflect three different emphases and a certain progression over the period in question. But after that, the situation is a little murky. Since we are dealing with soft borders, it is easy to cross from one side to the other without being particularly aware of it. There are various factors which are pertinent. Time is certainly a factor. For instance, one would be much more likely to be conscious of the third question towards the end of the period in question. It could also depend on the Biblical work being studied. The third question, rather than the first, might suggest itself as being more relevant to a study of the Psalms. By contrast, for a study of the route of the Exodus or of the journeys of Paul, one would clearly be asking what happened, i.e. the first question. It is perhaps significant that the two topics just mentioned no longer figure prominently in courses on the Pentateuch or the Letters of Paul

CONCLUSION

Not Leaving it to the Generals

It has been famously said that war is too important to be left to the generals.

The new graduate may find it a useful whip with which to beat the generals at the Beda. The academic jargon trotted out by professors is all very well. But it serves no useful purpose at the coalface. The real work is about to begin and graduation is a time for unlearning.

Let's leave the details for the time being. But I would agree with the principle. It is true that war is too serious to be left to the generals. The Scripture professor (to confine ourselves to one subject) does not promise to provide the answers for the busy pastor. But the professor does (or should) promise to provide the tools which will enable the pastor to find the answers.

The Scripture professor in other words is not an ecclesiastical version of the helicopter mom. The original helicopter mom hovers over the offspring to make sure that the little darling does not encounter problems outside the home, and, if challenges do arise, the parent is ready to swoop down! Mom continues to hover even to third level to ensure that Johnny wakes up in

time for lectures and to complain with the relevant authority when her budding Einstein gets a low grade.

But, even if it were desirable, the helicopter professor is not possible in the real world. Even a superficial glance over a relatively short period of 30 years shows that changes take place. Perhaps more often than not, these changes cannot be predicted. In a situation such as this, it is unrealistic to expect the Scripture lecture to provide all the answers. This is not only not feasible. It is not even desirable.

It would appear, though my only evidence is anecdotal, that one of the bestselling items in Catholic bookstores consists of – no, not the Bible – homilies for Sundays and Feast Days. One can only conclude that the preacher is nostalgic for the helicopter professor and has found an alternative.

The pastor is not a conduit relaying somebody else's answers. This is especially true when it comes to the word of God. If it is true that the Word of God is alive and active, then each encounter with the word will provide a new answer as it were.

Grandma Knows Best

It has been said of social psychology that it is the art of confirming things your grandmother would have told you! Could the same be said for other scientific areas of study? Like Biblical exegesis!

One is of course temperamentally averse even to the suggestion that one's day job is really much ado about nothing, i.e. a waste of time. But the cold light of day brings second thoughts. There may after all be something to be said for what grandmother would have told you.

Let's look at it from another perspective. The history of any science is marked by scientific discoveries. Biblical exegesis is no different. For good reason, such discoveries are accompanied by an understandable elation. After all, there has been a major breakthrough. New frontiers have been crossed. The scientist has discovered the silver bullet. A new age has dawned.

But there is often another side to that particular coin. The tide of elation may have an undercurrent of unacknowledged pomposity. The silver bullet suggests a panacea for problems previously unsolved and perhaps unsolvable. The breakthrough implies the breaking down of previously insurmountable barriers. The new frontier paves the way for entry into a new promised land. The golden age has dawned.

There is, in other words, no turning back. Why turn back from the golden age. There is no longer any need for grandma's wisdom. These are hard borders. In the words of Pope Francis, "They absolutize their own theories and force others to submit to their way of thinking" (*Gaudete et Exultate* 39).

We have met a hard border between two of the stages in the earlier discussion. The key to the question, What Does It Mean, is the intention of the author. By the time we come to the

next question, What Does it Mean to Me, we met the idea of the death of the author. In other words, it is a matter of throwing away the key. Or at least the key at one stage has become superfluous for the next.

Surely the truth lies somewhere in the middle. We rejoice in new discoveries without discarding received wisdom. Grandma may not know everything. But her wisdom remains indispensable.

That is also the wise conclusion of IBC. We have already quoted it, but it bears repeating. “No scientific method for the study of the Bible is fully adequate to comprehend the biblical texts in all their richness” (IBC I B).

Mind the Gap

This is obviously a bit of timely advice for the traveller in the London Underground. But it is not only in the London Underground that health and safety issues arise. Complacent academics need sometimes to be reminded to mind the gap. They need to be reminded that, while there may be a gap between new discoveries and what has preceded, they should not construct an iron curtain. The ultimate fate of totalitarian philosophies speaks for itself.

We have already had occasion to mention the Curé d'Ars syndrome. As regards the use of the Bible there can be a gap between the spiritual and the academic. And it is only natural that there should be. The problem arises when the gap is transformed into an iron curtain. This serves to stifle any interchange between the two levels, an interchange which is the lifeblood of each. The same is true between the inevitable gap between the academic and the pastoral, to take one of the more obvious examples.

In practice it is not always easy to maintain the balance, in that the principle is under attack from two opposing fronts. On the one hand, there is an anti-intellectual tendency whose patron saint is the Curé d'Ars and where much is made of a caricature of the Curé's alleged intellectual capability.

At the other extreme one finds what might be loosely called a gnostic tendency. This is how Pope Francis describes this particular phenomenon:

Here we have to be careful. I am not referring to a rationalism inimical to Christian faith. It can be present within the Church, both among the laity in parishes and *teachers of philosophy and theology in centres of formation*. Gnostics think that their explanations can make the entirety of the faith and the Gospel perfectly comprehensible (*Gaudete et Exultate* 39; emphasis added).

It is not easy to identify the patron saint of this approach. That may be because there are too many of them! We have already met Bart Ehrman, who is at once a respected exegete and a self-confessed agnostic atheist. Ehrman probably qualifies to be one of the movement's high priests.

The two extremes, the anti-intellectual and the gnostic, reflect a natural and indeed a healthy reality. Thus it is only natural that, in the biblical field, there are different areas, such as the spiritual and the academic. *Lectio divina* belongs to one compartment, an exegetical course in John belongs to another. The problem lies in the tendency to compartmentalization, which creates an unnatural barrier between one compartment and another and inhibits interaction between them.

There are many ways of ignoring the gap. The absolutist builds walls and treats those on the other side to a condescending sneer. The unthinking ignores the gap, assuming that there is no difference of opinion on the other side. But to ignore the gap is to run the risk of falling between the cracks. Or worse! So mind the gap.

Free Range Grazing

There is an aura of respectability about free ranging. After all, who would not choose free range eggs or free-range meat over the supermarket variety? Granted it may be a minority fad. But the fad has spread to other fields. There is for example free range education. It represents a reaction against the institutional in favour of a more child-centred, personalised model of learning. The pupil, instead of being cooped up like a chicken in cage, is allowed free range. The natural curiosity of students should not be stifled by institutional living, restricted hours, standardised curricula, testing and grades.

That would hardly work at the Beda however. Come to think of it, it would be the end of the Beda. No standardised curriculum! But it is worth a closer look.

Benedict XVI was fond of using an image which recurs through Christian tradition. Thus, on one occasion, he quotes Bonaventure to the effect that the words of Sacred Scripture “should always be ruminated upon so as to be able to gaze on them with ardent application of the soul,” (Benedict XVI general audience 17 August 2011).

That’s a much richer image than may appear at first sight. *Ruminate* is basically a Latin word whose literal meaning is to ‘chew the cud’. It may be that the average contemporary seminarian knows as little about Latin as about the animal kingdom. It may therefore need to be explained that the average cow ranges over the meadows and hillsides feeding on what they have to offer. ‘Feeding’ may not be the correct word! For the cow consigns what she has eaten to what amounts to a second compartment in her stomach (the reticulorumen, if you must know). When her ranging is over she goes to a quiet spot, regurgitates the contents of the reticulorumen (sorry about that), and chews the cud. She continues chewing even though she seems to be asleep and certainly contented. Difficult not to think of the Psalmist murmuring the Law of the Lord day and night (Ps 1:2)

In response to a question at a meeting with priests of the diocese of Rome on 22 Feb 2007, Benedict XVI had the following to say:

“The Word is always greater than the exegesis of the Fathers and critical exegesis because even this comprehends only a part, indeed, a minimal part. The Word is always greater, this is our immense consolation. And on the one hand it is lovely to

know that one has only understood a little. It is lovely to know that there is still an inexhaustible treasure and that every new generation will rediscover new treasures and journey on with the greatness of the Word of God that is always before us, guides us and is ever greater. One should read the Scriptures with an awareness of this”

There are two aspects of the statement which are worth noting. Firstly, he says that “it is lovely to know that one has only understood a little.” This might legitimately be taken as a comment on institutional education which involves such things as “the exegesis of the Fathers and critical exegesis.”

But Benedict also refers to the “inexhaustible treasure” which remains to be explored. It is clear from the pope’s comments that “inexhaustible” means what it says. This is free range education which takes place outside the institution.

Though the radical school might not agree, there are cases, the training for ministry for example, where institutional education is essential. This is not because it is an alternative to free range grazing. It is certainly not a substitute for it. It is not a condition for free range grazing, for one would like to think that free range pasture is possible without institutional education. But institutional education, a value in its own right, should serve as a stepping stone to wider pastures. One would like to think that it facilitates and enriches the free-range experience.

One of the side effects of no longer being at the Beda is that one’s reading material is more catholic. I have been reading a biography of John A. Costello. Only people of a certain vintage and of a certain nationality will know that he was not a famous Scripture scholar. He was an Irish prime minister in the late 1940s. Costello was struck by the parting words of his French professor at the final lecture in University College Dublin. “He told us that we then knew enough French to learn French. I have never forgotten that”

This is surely as true for Biblical Studies as it is for French. Institutional education plays an indispensable role. But it is not an end in itself. It is a launchpad for the “journey” of which Benedict XVI speaks. It is a journey which leads the explorer to the “inexhaustible treasure” of the Word. A broad new vista has been opened with unbounded scope for free range grazing.

As already noted, the pastoral image of rumination recurs throughout Christian tradition. Here is one example from St. Anthony the Hermit (H.-R. WEBER *The Book That Reads Me* 54):

A camel needs only a little food; it keeps it within until it returns to the stable. It lets the food come up again and again and ruminates it until the food enters the camel’s bones and flesh. The horse, however, needs much food; it eats all the time and soon loses all it has eaten. So let us not be like a horse, continuously reciting the words of God without obeying them. Let us rather resemble the camel, reciting each word of God and retaining it within us until we have lived it.

The moral of the story: be a camel not a horse.

As noted at the outset, I invariably began each Scripture course by reading Heb 4:12-13. The end of the course tended to be more difficult to control. But my aim was, with intermittent success, to end with another quotation which is arguably much better known than the two-edged sword quotation from Hebrews. At the end of the year, I let Winston Churchill have the last word:

Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.