



Rt Rev Robert Byrne CO
Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle

Pastoral Letter for the Year of the Word

To be read in all churches and chapels in the Diocese
1st Sunday of Lent 2020

My dear brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ,

This year the bishops of England and Wales are inviting us to open ourselves to the riches of the scriptures. We are invited to read the Bible prayerfully and regularly in order to listen to the ‘God who speaks’. The Bible is the account of God’s revelation to humanity. Without that revelation of God’s plan for us we would be lost. So we are encouraged to read the Bible for ourselves and to let God’s word find a place in our hearts. We heard in today’s gospel that the Lord said we do not live on bread alone, “but on every word that comes from the mouth of God”. We can learn from Jesus how to let God’s word shape and transform our lives. His Word is alive and active with the power to make us into the people he wants us to be. It was St Jerome the great biblical scholar of the fourth century who famously said that “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ”. (Prologue to the commentary on the Book of Isaiah). Sadly, in the past Catholics were shy to read the Bible but the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council urged us to learn “the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ” (Phil3:8) by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures” (Dei Verbum 25). I am inviting you to do this starting in Lent and for the rest of the year and even beyond.

I would like to make some practical suggestions to help you make a start. I recommend that you obtain a modern Catholic translation of the Bible - this is important as we have some additional books in the Old Testament. These are available online or in many bookshops, your Parish Priest will help you to find a suitable edition. For those whose first language isn’t English the Bible Society has translations in many different languages. Once you start to read the Bible for yourself or as a group, you should say a short inward prayer to the Holy Spirit asking him to help you understand it. Ask him to help you to understand the meaning of the Bible as the Church understands it, and if you are puzzled seek the help of a commentary. It is important that you have an aid to help you understand the passages you read. You may already have a way of helping you read the Bible such as Magnificat, Day by Day or Bible Alive. A resource for groups and individuals ‘In Power and Mercy’ is available on our diocesan website. It also has reflections on the Mass readings for every day in Lent, or you might prefer to reread the Sunday readings throughout the week. I hope that in your parish or partnership groups you will meet each week to reflect on and pray the Scriptures. If we all resolve to do this starting in Lent then as a diocese we will be renewed and strengthened in our individual lives and together as a community. Best of all our scripture groups could then become a regular part of our parish life.

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It is ten years since Pope Benedict wrote in his report of the Bishops' Synod' which reflected on the Word of God, in it he said: 'May every day of our lives be shaped by a renewed encounter with Christ, the word of the Father made flesh. 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.' (Verbum Domini p.170)

My experience is that every time we read the Scriptures, we see new depths and meanings to God's dealings with us. When we read the gospels, we hear the voice of Jesus speaking in the depths of our hearts. As we go through life our own experience broadens and we are able to take in aspects of our Lord's words which did not mean much to us before. Consequently, we grow closer to Christ and we gradually learn to behave and talk in the way he wants.


St Paul found that he was able to say;
"now it is not I that live but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20)

If we are prepared to take the words of Jesus into our minds and hearts; trying to frame our lives on his teaching, one day we shall be able to say that too.

As the Year of the Word unfolds there will be many events and initiatives to help us listen through the Bible to "the God who speaks". Full details can be found on our diocesan website and that of the Catholic Bishops' Conference. A supplementary sheet containing the various events in our diocese will be available to you after Mass. I am sure your Parish Priest will also keep you informed.

Pope Francis recently said that the Bible belongs to all those who are called to hear its message and to recognise themselves in its words. "The Bible" he says "is the book of the Lord's people who in listening to it move towards unity." (Aperuit illis:4) I hope and pray that the Year of the Word will be for us as a diocese and as individuals a real opportunity to listen and act on God's word so that we become a more vibrant and faithful Church ready to face the future together in hope.

Yours devotedly in Christ,



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