2. *Lectio Divina*

Lectio Divina *in the Monasteries*

The exegesis of Scripture is the foundation of all that Bonaventure taught and wrote.[1] This is why his masterly *Commentary on Luke's Gospel* is so important a key to understanding his mind and spiritual outlook as a Franciscan theologian and leader. It was regarded by contemporaries as outstanding, as indeed it is.[2] It is also substantial in length and depth, constituting over 2200 pages of printed English translation and virtually a whole folio volume in the Latin printed edition.[3] It was intended to assist the work of preaching, and it remains eminently usable today. It reflects exactly the balance and fusion of his thought as a theologian with his devotion as a Franciscan. Its genius lies in the supreme skill by which Bonaventure safeguarded the deepest spiritual impulses and insights of traditional monastic *lectio divina*,[4] expressing them anew by his consummate mastery of the thorough analytic approach to the Bible that had been developed in the schools. Bonaventure's goal was simple: to enable effective preaching of the Gospel, while doing justice to the new sense of spiritual and evangelical immediacy induced by the memory of St Francis. If the text of the Gospel confirmed that Francis was truly Christ-like, what did this mean for Christian life and evangelism, following his example, and how could this be properly expressed?

The roots of Christian exegesis of Scripture lie in the gospels themselves: in the teaching of Jesus, who radically interpreted Jewish scripture while claiming to fulfil its true meaning; and also that of Paul. In his second letter to Corinthians, for example, Paul proclaimed a 'new covenant, not written but spiritual; for the written law condemns to death, but the Spirit gives life'.[5] The great exponent of this approach to the Scriptures was Origen, who was influenced by Philo of Alexandria before him. Both developed an allegorical approach to the text of the Bible, and one of Origen's most influential commentaries was on the Canticle, or the Song

of Songs, which clearly needed interpreting beyond its literal meaning.[6] Difficulties in literal meaning prompt deeper enquiry into the moral and spiritual meaning hidden within the text. Moreover the Old Testament contained the message of the New Testament by means of 'types' or patterns inherent within it, which only become clear in the light of the Gospel and person of Christ, for example the figure of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53. Augustine developed this symbolical mode of interpretation further in his *De Doctrina Christiana*, completed in 427. This proved to be a crucial foundation of all subsequent medieval exegesis of Scripture in the Western Church. Augustine taught that the words of the Bible are catalysts for discerning the inner presence and teaching of Christ by spiritual intuition. The many meanings of Scripture reflect the manifold nature of divine truth revealed in Christ the Word of God. The reality of Christian truth comes alive as it is prayed and taught, being rooted in meditation and intellectual contemplation: for 'in Thy light shall we see light . . . Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.'[7]

It was Gregory the Great who more than anyone else mediated this tradition and approach to the early medieval Church, and especially through the monastic tradition whose life he nurtured and promoted in his *Life of St Benedict*. Gregory's *Moralia* on the Book of Job, a figure with whom he closely identified, and his many homilies on Ezekiel and on the gospels set a pattern of exegesis that was fundamental to *lectio divina* and biblical exegesis as it developed within Western monastic life.[8] Gregory taught that Scripture was a direct communication between God and His people, a guiding light through the moral morass of human life, containing the hope and promise of the deeper reality of eternal life, which is the true goal and meaning of human existence. The key agent in this work of communication is the Holy Spirit, present in the writers of Scripture, and present also in the minds and hearts of devout Christian readers, individually and in community. Scripture is truly the 'bread of life' to be digested carefully with serious thought and meditation: this prayerful 'chewing over' or 'rumination' is the substance and *raison d'être* of monastic *lectio divina*.

Gregory taught that the presence of the Holy Spirit opens the door of the mind to many rich and diverse interpretations arising from the letter of the text, as the manifold truth of Christian faith is discerned in each generation, for in the words of Jesus, 'the Spirit will guide you into all truth.'[9] Christian truth flows outward

in effective preaching because of its continual movement inward in prayerful reading; for all preaching and reading is inevitably interpretation as well as expression of truth. Underlying this spiritual and intellectual process was the ancient Christian principle that 'when you pray, you speak to God; when you read, God speaks to you.' Crucial to its success was the careful cultivation of memory through liturgy and reading, and this *lectio divina* lay at the heart of Benedictine monastic life as it developed in the centuries after Gregory the Great.[10] The most influential exponent of this approach to the Bible was Bede, who sought as a disciple of Gregory by his commentaries and homilies to supplement Gregory's exegetical writings and sermons, while providing potent exemplars of his own exegesis in his *De Tabernaculo* and *De Templo*, which are really works of ecclesiology.[11] Bede's stature as a Doctor of the Church rests upon his crucial role as a pre-eminent teacher of the Bible in the Middle Ages, who mediated and made accessible a rich tradition of spiritual exegesis that extended back through Gregory to Augustine, Ambrose and Jerome.

In his commentary on Luke's gospel, Bonaventure cites Bede more than any other patristic authority. He did this by direct reference to Bede's own commentary on this gospel as well as to other of his writings; he often did it also indirectly when he cited the *Glossa Ordinaria*.[12] This had been developed in the early twelfth century by Anselm of Laon and his disciples. Its format was to surround the text of Scripture with relevant excerpts from the Fathers that commented upon its meaning, also inserting interlinear comments elucidating points of detail. This encyclopaedic approach had the effect of greatly expanding the range and nature of biblical exegesis, as the glosses became almost as significant as the text of Scripture itself. This was first evident in the commentary by Peter Comestor on the gospels in the middle of the twelfth century, generated in Paris.

Biblical Exegesis in Paris

The immediate heirs and successors to Anselm of Laon, however, were the canons of the abbey of St Victor, founded in 1110 in Paris.[13] They sought to combine wide-ranging learning with deep spiritual devotion, attracting many students from across Europe. Hugh of St Victor epitomised this vision, setting out a balanced framework of Christian study in his *Didascalion*.[14] He was confident that careful mastery of the arts and sciences would equip a person

for proper understanding of the text of Scripture in its historical reality and meaning. In order to progress into the deeper meaning hidden in the Bible, orthodox Christian doctrine, derived from the Fathers, was indispensable. On this basis, true contemplation could proceed: 'for all nature speaks of God and all nature teaches man'.[15] The history within Scripture is the key to understanding the history of the world. The salvation of humanity proceeds by means of sacraments that transform reality, and this pattern is evident throughout the Bible. Therefore what is actually written in the letter of the text is the anchor of all true understanding, reining in allegorical speculation and resisting heresy. Hugh was followed by Richard and Andrew of St Victor, who in different ways developed his approach to Scripture. Richard's masterpieces *Benjamin Minor* and *Benjamin Major* were influential because of their rich contemplative theology.[16] Andrew went further into biblical studies by consulting Jewish scholars about disputed texts and discussing their meaning for both Jews and Christians.

The growth of the university in Paris in the twelfth century marched in step with a rapid growth in the teaching of the Bible. Under the leadership of Peter Comestor, Peter the Chanter and Stephen Langton, biblical studies became central to the study of theology, particularly with reference to morality and leadership in the Church. Stephen Langton left a permanent mark inasmuch as the chapter and verse divisions in the Bible date from his time and were largely the product of his design. He also helped to establish the fixed text of the Latin Vulgate Bible that came to be published in Paris in the thirteenth century. Indeed no century or place witnessed a more thorough and disciplined approach to and exposition of the Bible, and those who helped form Bonaventure played a central role in continuing this in the first part of the thirteenth century.[17] Stephen Langton left Paris in 1206 to become a cardinal and in due course archbishop of Canterbury; shortly afterwards, Edmund of Abingdon departed to help create the University of Oxford. A decade later, the Dominicans opened their centre of study in Paris in 1229, followed shortly by the Franciscans in 1231. Bonaventure explicitly declared his own debt to Alexander of Hales, an English master of theology who became a Franciscan towards the end of his career. Bonaventure's *Commentary on Luke* also drew heavily on the contemporary work of Hugh of St Cher, a Dominican master who became in due course a cardinal. These were the first friars to compose commentaries on all four gospels.[18]

Hugh of St Cher joined the Dominicans in 1225 as a well-established teacher of canon law as well as of theology. He rapidly became a senior figure in the Dominican Order, initially in Paris. He relinquished his teaching career in 1236 to preside over the Dominicans in France until 1244, when Pope Innocent IV made him a cardinal; he died in 1264. His commentaries on the gospels arose out of his teaching, much of it before he became a Dominican. With a team of able assistants, he compiled a wide-ranging body of material intended to draw out the meaning of the gospels along traditional lines, but also incorporating more recent scholarship, such as the work of Peter Comestor and Peter the Chanter. He was the first to use a new Latin translation of the homilies of St John Chrysostom on the gospel of John, for example. He also included for the first time a considerable amount of theology from Bernard of Clairvaux, some of which found its way into Bonaventure's *Commentary on Luke*. Like Stephen Langton and Peter the Chanter, Hugh's commentary had a practical moral end: to educate clergy and laity so that the life of the Church might be reformed and renewed. As a Dominican, Hugh had much to say about preaching and its importance: its vitality arose from disciplined and informed study and *lectio divina*, leading to prayer and mystical contemplation. Only the experience of divine love could enable a preacher to kindle it within the hearts and minds of his hearers.

Alexander's career was parallel to that of Hugh, whose work he probably knew. He was educated in Paris, becoming a master of theology around the year 1223 until 1227. He joined the Franciscans late in his career in 1236 and became their foremost teacher in Paris until his death at the first Council of Lyons in 1245. He was a formidable theologian who for the first time based his lectures on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard rather than directly on the text of the Bible. These *Sentences* comprised an exhaustive compendium of patristic theology and commentary and became the central framework for all subsequent medieval study of theology. His *Quaestiones Disputatae* and his *Glossa* on the *Sentences* constitute the bulk of his remaining work; they were generated before he became a Franciscan. It is unclear, however, when his commentaries on the gospels should be dated, though some of them reveal knowledge of the work of Hugh of St Cher. He used similar patristic sources as Hugh, but derived some of his material from earlier commentaries associated with Anselm of Laon and his

circle. His approach was at times more analytical, being influenced by his work as a theologian, and there is no evidence of an overtly Franciscan approach to the texts of the Gospel. Contemporary with Alexander, and a likely teacher of Bonaventure, was John of La Rochelle, who has left lectures on all four gospels. He too was a Franciscan, who taught in Paris from 1236 until his death in 1245. He drew on the work of Hugh of St Cher as well as that of Alexander of Hales, but was more overtly Franciscan at times in his teaching, for example about poverty. He was also concerned to defend the work of study and learning within the life of his Order, and to uphold the authority of the Pope, who was the protector of the friars.

There is little evidence in these commentaries of the storm of criticism that would fall upon the mendicants in Paris in the middle of the century, with which Bonaventure and Aquinas had to contend. The challenge to the lifestyle of the friars, as much as to their influence and prestige in the universities and elsewhere, put a spot-light on the acute question of how the gospels should actually be read – and lived. For, in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, Francis

> 'had dared to make the unheard of attempt to translate the word of the Sermon on the Mount into the living work of his own life, and to make the spirit of Jesus Christ and the immediate demand of the Gospel into the only norm for Christian living. . . . The event of Francis effectively shattered a whole concept of a tradition which had become too canonical. [19] Francis' own life had developed from an immediate contact with the Scriptures, which he desired to understand and to live literally *sine glossa* in an immediate encounter with the Lord who speaks to us in the Sacred Writings. . . . The *vita apostolica* had become a reality in Francis.'[20]

So great was the impact of the Christ-like life of Francis, culminating in the imposition of the stigmata, that Joachim of Fiore and his followers regarded him as the harbinger of the new age of the Spirit. At the same time, other Christians challenged the very authenticity of the Franciscan way of life as extreme, corrupting and parasitic, and thereby demeaned the spiritual significance and memory of Francis himself. In his *Commentary on Luke*, Bonaventure had to steer an urgent but orthodox path between this Scylla and

Charybdis. In so doing, he founded the Franciscan way firmly on the actual text of the Gospel, seen in the light of Francis, while doing selective justice to the whole tradition of biblical exegesis and *lectio divina* that he had inherited and in which he was formed. His was therefore a great work of transformation as well as of elucidation and education, a potent instrument for preaching, and also an eloquent guide to the life in Christ as exemplified and illuminated by Francis.

Bonaventure's approach to the Bible

'The whole of sacred Scripture teaches these three truths: namely, the eternal generation and incarnation of Christ, the pattern of human life, and the union of the soul with God.' In this key definition, Bonaventure outlined his approach to the exegesis of the Bible.[21] He developed its application with consummate care in his prologue to the *Breviloquium*, which he wrote as a guide for Franciscan students studying Christian theology: it was published in 1257, just as his own life was changing from solely teaching in university to becoming Minister General.[22] Bonaventure took as his opening text some words of Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, in which he prayed that his hearers would be empowered by the Holy Spirit to experience the indwelling of Christ, so that 'rooted and grounded in love' they might be able to comprehend, within the communion of the saints, 'the breadth and length, the height and depth' of the love of Christ that 'surpasses all knowledge':[23] for the goal of human life is indeed to become 'filled with all the fullness of God'.

For Bonaventure, Scripture flows from God the Trinity, in a perpetual stream of self-giving revelation. The gift of the Holy Spirit enables the vision of Christ, the Word of God, who is the source of authority within Scripture: prayerful faith in Christ is therefore the essential prerequisite for understanding Scripture. The Bible gives to human beings all that they need to know for their salvation. In language literal and also symbolic, it addresses the *breadth* of the universe, the *length* of human history and its future, the *height* of human destiny to eternal life, and the *depth* experienced by those who reject the love of God and so are condemned in the end. 'Like a certain noble mirror, it was designed to reflect the whole complex of created reality, not only naturally but also supernaturally' in a manner condign to human capacity.[24]

Using the same framework, Bonaventure proceeded to outline the *breadth* of Scripture by its great variety of writings, its *length* in terms of the history it describes and the end it intimates, its *height* in relation to the invisible hierarchy of spiritual powers, and its *depth* in terms of the manifold levels of its meaning. Bonaventure endorsed the traditional fourfold framework of Christian exegesis: literal and thus historical; allegorical indicating belief; moral relating to virtue; and anagogical (or sacramental), by which he meant that which lifts humanity up towards its heavenly and eternal destiny:[25] for Scripture is sacramental in its character and impact. This fourfold framework reflects the inherent message of Scripture that speaks of God, Christ, redemption and belief. The rugged and at times obscure nature of the text conceals the hidden wisdom of God, as Jesus was wrapped in swaddling bands in the manger, thus making the Bible accessible to all manner of people with different levels of understanding, while curbing any human pride in understanding it. Moreover, 'God speaks not with words alone, but also through deeds, because with God to say is to do, and to do is to say.'[26]

Scripture interacts with creation to point human beings to God their Creator. Crucial to true understanding is prior belief in Christ and also a willing desire for God: for salvation comes not by 'bare speculation' but by 'an inclination of the will'.[27] The authority of Scripture flows from God and must induce repentance and change of heart; its study is never simply an intellectual exercise. To teach Scripture therefore requires diligent and prayerful reading over a long period of time, 'committing its literal sense to memory', as Bonaventure himself clearly did, saying, 'for one who scorns the letter of sacred Scripture will never rise to interpreting its spiritual meaning'.[28] Drawing on Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* as well as Robert Grosseteste's more recent *De Cessatione Legalium*, Bonaventure established the ground rules by which any text of Scripture might be interpreted faithfully.[29] The fourfold structure within Scripture forms essentially 'an intelligible cross' by which the meaning of the whole created world and human history may be discerned. With this as a guide, someone approaching Christian theology need not get lost in the apparently impenetrable forest of the Bible. Instead, as with a compass, using belief in God as the First Principle of Goodness from which all Christian belief flows, Bonaventure demonstrated deductively in his *Breviloquium* that 'the truth of sacred Scripture is from God, that it treats of God, is

according to God, and has God as its end.'[30] Theology is thus a true science in terms of its inherent unity and order, anchored however in divine revelation and authority, which enables human reason to function properly in union with love.

In his *Commentary on Luke's Gospel*, Bonaventure put these principles of biblical exegesis into practice to great effect. He envisaged a fourfold division of Luke's gospel. The opening chapters, one to three, he described as revealing the *Mystery of the Incarnation*. The second section, stretching for most of the gospel, from chapter four to chapter twenty-one, set forth the *Teaching of Christ's Preaching*, by word and deed. The third section embraced the latter part of the Passion Narrative in chapters twenty-two and -three, describing it as the *Medicine of the Passion*. The last section speaks of the *Triumph of the Resurrection* in chapter twenty-four.[31] Bonaventure's sense of clarity, order and development will strike any reader of this commentary. Not only does he bring into sharp focus the inherent structure and intention of the evangelist's work, but also within his commentary many of his paragraphs have a similar tight order of argument and exposition. Frequently he demonstrates the whole range of ways in which a certain word is used in the Latin Bible and its spiritual significance in the light of Christ; the drama of the gospel takes place against a rich backdrop of Old Testament allusions. It is also illuminated brightly by the testimony of the Apostles in the rest of the New Testament, as well as by the teaching of the Church Fathers and the more recent memory of Francis.

The Latin version of this commentary is replete with copious detailed notes, indicating where Bonaventure was deploying material from earlier commentators. Some of this is evident also in the notes to the English translation, especially where he was relying on and also developing material drawn from Hugh of St Cher or Bernard of Clairvaux. The indices to each volume of the English translation record a wealth of biblical references, as well as the great range of patristic and other sources used by Bonaventure. His knowledge of the Bible was truly remarkable and it remains highly instructive.

Bonaventure's preface to his commentary comprises two parts: in the first, he expounds the significance of the first sermon of Jesus at Nazareth in Luke chapter four. He uses it to affirm his own expectation of preaching, as well as demonstrating how this sermon and its reception were an epitome of the approach taken by this particular evangelist, and indeed of the whole ministry of Jesus. It

is not difficult to see how the tone and substance of the text from Isaiah that Jesus preached about related directly to the memory and example of Francis also. Bonaventure then includes a prologue to Luke's gospel attributed to Jerome, which he proceeds to explain in some detail, in order to bring out the distinctive attributes and emphases of this evangelist as the writer of this gospel and also of the Acts of the Apostles. He notes in conclusion that 'the first teachers should leave to their successors something to interpret.'[32] In Bonaventure, the writer of Luke's gospel certainly found a most sympathetic, informed and eloquent interpreter.