8. The Word of God

Bonaventure anchored all his thought and theology in the Bible, of which he had a formidable mastery, both as a scholar and as a teacher.[1] Two commentaries remain from his hand in addition to the extensive commentary that he wrote on Luke's gospel for use by Franciscan preachers and teachers.[2] His commentary on the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes soon became the most popular commentary on this text in the later medieval period.[3] It was written while Bonaventure was lecturing in theology in Paris in the years before 1257. His commentary on John's gospel, also composed there during this period, distilled his long experience in teaching this text in the university, and it is designed as a handbook that elucidates traditional exegesis, while addressing the numerous questions raised by students engaged in formal discussion of the Gospel.[4] The contrast in style between these two commentaries and the *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* is quite marked, revealing the extent to which Bonaventure broke the mould in creating such an extensive masterpiece of exposition: as a result, his commentary on Luke is highly amenable for the modern reader.[5] The other two commentaries, however, require some adjustment and attention in order to engage with the way that Bonaventure approached the Bible within the confines of the university environment. His labours were part of a much wider movement in the thirteenth century in the development of biblical exegesis in Paris and elsewhere.

Bonaventure believed that the whole Bible should be interpreted by reference primarily to itself. The rich repertoire of Latin vocabulary used in Scripture enabled him to illuminate the meaning of any text by multiple references to show how similar words and ideas were expressed elsewhere. One mind of the Holy Spirit governed the final formation of Scripture through all the exigencies of history and human fallibility and, as a consequence,

Bonaventure respected and upheld the integrity and authority of the given text of the Latin Bible at that time, the *textus receptus*. He expected and demonstrated complete competence with, and memory of, every part of Scripture. Although he was not unmindful of the historical context and detail embedded in the text, he had little familiarity with the Greek or Hebrew texts underlying the Old and New Testaments. Nevertheless, he had great confidence in the inherent structure and coherence of the Latin Bible, regarding it like a musical instrument where each string supports the performance of the whole. Thus, the bulk of his commentaries were guided by references drawn from across the whole of Scripture. The preacher or teacher was like a musician playing an elaborate instrument, whose language was also an elaborate musical score with many levels of meaning. The key to being able to do this was a well cultivated and completely ordered memorisation of Scripture.

The fundamental discipline of Bonaventure's approach, however, was based in doing justice to the actual text firstly as a historical document. The literal sense was essential and had to be carefully committed to memory, like the letters that compose words. Only then would the inherent moral, spiritual and sacramental meaning of the text begin reliably to unfold. In addition to this basic mode of exposition, placing each particular passage within a rich panoply of Scriptural association and meaning, Bonaventure also deployed two other teaching approaches. Firstly, the commentaries on Ecclesiastes and John's gospel both contain many searching questions, often quite critical, which Bonaventure addressed head on. This format encapsulated the mode of approach in the universities at that time, where seminars followed more formal exposition and where questions were clearly encouraged. Secondly, Bonaventure from time to time inserts mini-sermons of spiritual or moral exposition, an element which he developed to a much greater degree in his commentary on Luke's gospel. Both these strands of teaching enriched the way in which the teaching of the Bible could be appropriated and absorbed by those whose would eventually preach from it. For Bonaventure, all Christian theology should also deepen spiritual life and nurture goodness; theology for Franciscans was never to be a speculative or academic end in itself. He was himself a highly capable preacher, as well as an experienced and well-formed teacher, and it is within these two

strands of thought and teaching that the golden seam of his own spiritual theology may be discerned, embedded within these two commentaries.

Commentary on Ecclesiastes

This book of the Bible played a more important part in the spiritual life of the medieval Church than it does in the life of the Church today. On first reading, it may seem a discordant book to find within the Bible, being marked by deep pessimism and almost cynicism towards life in the world. Inasmuch as it taught contempt for the false and passing values of the world, however, it had long been part of monastic tradition. For medieval Christians, Ecclesiastes was redeemed by its conclusion, which asserts the Providence of God and His inexorable judgement: 'This is the end of the matter: you have heard it all. Fear God and obey His commandments; this sums up the whole duty of mankind. For God will bring everything we do to judgement, every secret, whether good or bad.'[6] This book is often not distant in spirit from the Quran, as well as some of the psalms and other parts of the wisdom tradition in the Bible.

Bonaventure relied on the existing biblical *Glossae* which aggregated the commentaries of earlier Fathers of the Church like Jerome and Hugh of Saint-Victor in a frame around the actual text of the Bible. He also followed quite closely a more recent commentary on Ecclesiastes by an older contemporary, the Dominican Hugh of Saint-Cher, who later became a cardinal and died in 1263.[7] In many places Bonaventure uses the same range of biblical references as Hugh, also citing classical writers and earlier theologians through Hugh's references to them. In his treatment of the questions arising, however, Bonaventure goes beyond the approach of Hugh. What is striking in all his biblical commentaries is the extent to which Bonaventure creatively developed the tradition in which he was nurtured and within which he taught so proficiently. The impulse to cultivate prayer and Christian virtue with a Franciscan ethos sustained and deepened his distinctive approach.

Bonaventure begins his commentary by tackling the moral challenge inherent in Ecclesiastes: if God made the world so beautiful and good, why or how should it be despised? He distinguishes between true love that seeks the eternal and

false desire that attaches itself to what is temporal. Following Augustine, Bonaventure indicates the profound chasm within human history and experience as a result of this bifurcation of aims: two human cities exist, governed by the incompatible principles of well-ordered love and disordered desire.[8] Christians are called to participate in the blessedness of God as mediated by Christ. God's goodness and grace overflow and His nature does not change; therefore, 'perfect tranquillity exists in God alone'. His peace is eternal, and life in Him is also eternal; for in His will is our peace.

None of this comes by relying on what is available in the world. Human beings are deceived and distracted by the vanity of things and the transience of events, and their inner spiritual needs are not satisfied by them. Temporal things are at best shadows of eternal realities; and shadows cannot satisfy, they can only torment as they flee away. 'This world cannot give rest, because it does not endure, but is always in motion.'[9] Moreover, as Christ warned, by 'gaining the world', human beings are in great danger of forfeiting their souls.[10] Pride then fills the void and pride is a fatal delusion. Greed and self-indulgence follow in its wake, taking the heart out of humanity; for, as in the words of Jesus, 'where your treasure is, there will your heart be also'.[11] Human curiosity becomes the basis for a false wisdom that is unable to discern the true nature of reality. The result is the barrenness of a busy life that rapidly becomes the compulsive busyness of a barren life, where everything becomes ephemeral and superficial.

Bonaventure placed Ecclesiastes within the trilogy of works attributed traditionally to the wise king Solomon: whereas Proverbs equips a person to live wisely in the world, Ecclesiastes teaches 'contempt for present realities'; the Song of Songs, however, teaches love for the heavenly bridegroom. Essentially, Ecclesiastes is concerned to address the way in which false love for what is seen prevents true perception of what reality is. This is what redeems Ecclesiastes for Bonaventure, and enables him to interpret it in the light of his own high expectation of the created world as the mirror of divine truth and glory, a ladder up to God. The apparent negativity of approach by the writer of Ecclesiastes is intended to wean people off false attractions, which are described as vanities. These appear to be good and, in one sense, they are; but, in another sense, they are bad inasmuch as they can easily become objects of passionate attachment. Bonaventure identifies

the writer's approach as that of a preacher[12] weighing up the alternatives in order to distil what is true for the benefit of those listening to him, carrying them along with him. The authority of Solomon was precisely that of someone with great experience of the world's goods, wise but also voluptuous. He knew its snares. So, his advice sprang from bitter personal experience and keen disappointment and, thus, his conclusion that 'all is vanity'.

The opening question arising from this introduction by Bonaventure begins by corroborating its teaching with references to the letters of James and 1 John, which warn against love of the world that becomes enmity towards God.[13] Immediately, however, the question is raised whether contempt for the created world is not in fact contempt for God the Creator? Should it not instead be loved, as it is directed towards God, who is its cause and its goal?

Citing Augustine and Hugh of Saint-Victor, Bonaventure speaks of a wedding ring given to a bride: this can either be loved properly and chastely, as a sign of love for her husband; or it can be loved improperly and valued more than its giver, and such love is false and adulterous. Similarly, if the ring were despised as of no account, this would reflect contempt for its giver; but, if it were regarded as little more than nothing in comparison with the love of which it is the token and sign, this would give due glory to the husband as its giver.[14] The world is thus to be loved and valued only as the token and sign of divine love and eternal reality.

Reading Ecclesiastes raises many difficult questions: who exactly is speaking, and what weight should be attached to his words? Bonaventure points out the singular style of this book, the way in which the writer, speaking as a preacher, 'weaves his argument in such a way that different persons present diverse opinions'.[15] One is 'carnal' while another is 'wise'; but the value of all that is said must be governed by the conclusion of this book, already cited, and summed up in the command to 'fear God', whose judgement is unerring. As a result, some things are said plainly, while others are ironic in tone. Some things are said by way of approval, others as admissions of fact or as temptations, not always complimentary to the speaker. 'Hence this book is a kind of meditation by Solomon.'[16] In the end, everything experienced is a gift from God, to be used and enjoyed accordingly; therein lies its significance and truth.

The second strand of Bonaventure's distinctive approach is woven throughout the commentary, providing mini-sermons or reflections on how Scripture sheds a wider meaning on what is being said. This approach is very evident in his many sermons, as well as highly developed in his commentary on Luke's gospel. For example, commenting on Ecclesiastes 1:5-7, where the preacher speaks about the repeated natural cycle of life, of wind and water and also of the sun itself, Bonaventure indicates a spiritual interpretation in the light of the Gospel that is far removed from the original writer's intention.[17] The sun represents Christ who arose in the Incarnation, set in his Passion, returned to his rightful place in the Ascension, and circulates still through the prayers of the saints. Likewise, the word for 'wind'[18] indicates the Holy Spirit, searching all things and alerting human beings to their need of grace and the call of divine glory. Expounding the teaching of Jesus in John's gospel, Bonaventure speaks of the rivers of grace and the sea of divine generosity, from which and to which all the water of life flows. Each point is corroborated by a passage from Scripture, until a picture is painted of divine operation mirrored in the natural world and also apparent throughout the Bible.

In another example of this symbolical understanding of Scripture, Bonaventure sees Solomon as representing Christ, whose household is richly endowed with active and contemplative servants.[19] Contemplatives enjoy the security of a peaceful conscience as their inner home, with vineyards rich in devotion, trees that represent virtues, and orchards bearing fragrant fruits of good works, watered by the pools of their tears. Active servants are marked by their humility, their strenuous work like oxen, and their simplicity of intention like sheep: their gold is their love, and their silver is their eloquence in bearing witness to Christ; and their wealth lies in their generosity by which they emulate their Lord. This exposition is coloured by the language of the Song of Songs, signifying how the outward Christian life has its deep roots within the love of God.

Commenting on the famous passage in which the preacher outlines the paradoxes of time and existence, 'a time to be born and a time to die', Bonaventure turns it into an applied allegory addressing the various stages of Christian life.[20] Thus, the baptised have to die to sin in order to be born again, while penitents experience the sorrowful joy of contrition and compunction. Sometimes, the righteous will have to act but, other times, to

withdraw into contemplation. Sometimes, they will be called to give alms, and some may even be called to give up everything that they have accumulated as a work of Christian perfection. For bishops and other leaders, there is certainly a time to keep silent and a time to speak or teach. They must hate evil but love the good, fight valiantly if need be, but always pursue peace. Bonaventure was confident that the Bible interpreted in this way revealed the hidden meaning of the created world, and that Scripture and the created world together shed light on the mystery of the Church and its hidden life in Christ. Scripture, creation and the Church all mediate and express the divine reality now revealed definitively in Christ.

Following a well-established tradition of exegesis that stretched back through Jerome to Origen, Bonaventure discerned a cryptic reference to Christ, the Word of God, hidden in a passage[21] where the preacher contrasted a poor but wise youth, who emerged from prison to become a king, with an elderly ruler set in his ways. Christ was a child in his innocence but wise with the wisdom of God. He was born poor yet confronted the devil, who was blind in the arrogance of his power to Christ's emergence from the prison of death, and was duly despoiled by him of all his wealth. In such a way, all Scripture points to Christ in whom divine truth is embodied and revealed in his Incarnation and Passion.[22]

All Scripture also indicates how men and women should live. Later in his commentary remarking on a passage in which the preacher urges a cheerful engagement with this life while it lasts, Bonaventure turns it into a little homily about the joy of contemplation and the urgency of Christian action.[23] Contemplation requires meditation on Scripture, a pure conscience and inner devotion, each of which is symbolically indicated by the words of the writer. Bread and wine signify divine wisdom, and white garments a clean conscience, which attracts the oil of gladness. Each of these associations is corroborated by other texts of Scripture. Monastic commitment is like marriage and both require stability of life and perseverance. Those called to a more active life are bidden to be quick, enthusiastic and diligent to the end, for in this life, 'the time for gaining merit is brief'. Scripture consistently summons people to the true worship of God. Commenting on the opening of the last chapter of Ecclesiastes, Bonaventure takes up the injunction, 'remember your Creator in the days of your youth'.[24] People should recall the generous giving

of God as the Creator of all that exists, and also the giver of their power to live and to do what is good. The Incarnation of Christ is to be remembered, as is also the cost of human redemption on the Cross. The fact that God rewards goodness and gives more than we deserve or desire should call forth thanks, expressed by unswerving loyalty and obedience to Him and love for Him.

Neither the writer of Ecclesiastes nor Bonaventure shirks facing the inevitability of death, which calls into question all that human beings think that they achieved.[25]

> For mortals depart to their everlasting home and their mourners go about the streets. Remember your Creator before the silver cord is snapped and the golden bowl is broken, before the pitcher is shattered at the spring and the wheel broken at the well; before the dust returns to the earth as it began, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.[26]

To Bonaventure, these poignant words signify the consequences and finality of divine judgement. The silver cord represents the power of human speech now reduced to silence in the presence of God. The golden fillet[27] that dwindles represents the waning of the power of the bishops to bind and loose as Christ resumes control of the Church. The broken pitcher represents the bankruptcy of all human curiosity that seeks to tap the wells of earthly wisdom. The broken cistern similarly represents the futility of piling up wealth only to be broken by the wheel of fortune. The dust is all that becomes of unrepentant sinners, condemned to the dark places of the earth, while the spirits of the righteous depart to be with God forever. Bonaventure dismisses the idea that the human spirit once fell from some divine state into a body. Instead, he teaches that 'it comes from and through God and is ordered towards God'. This is the reason for human existence and the true destiny of each person, made in the image and likeness of God, and now redeemed by Him in Christ. As in the words of Paul, 'when Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory'.[28]

Thus, the writer of Ecclesiastes steers his hearers through the morass of the world's vanities towards the haven of divine judgement, truth and accountability. As Bonaventure says, 'Christ will judge everything, because Christ sees everything'; and he concludes by adapting some words of Boethius from the end of

his *Consolation of Philosophy*: 'A great necessity of doing well is imposed upon us, for we do all things in the sight of the Judge who sees all things.'[29] It is interesting that Bonaventure concludes his commentary in this way; for the experience of Boethius, in prison (where he wrote *Consolation*) and awaiting death after a distinguished life of public service, led Bonaventure also to reflect on human life and destiny and the abiding values of God, leaving to the medieval Church and society in his treatise a potent instrument of thought and reflection. The parallels between Ecclesiastes and the *Consolation of Philosophy* are striking.[30]

Commentary on the Gospel of John

Bonaventure's *Commentary on the Gospel of John* also arose from his extensive teaching experience in Paris and was probably completed in 1256.[31] The hallmarks of this are the 414 *quaestiones* appended throughout the commentary, dealing with sharp and demanding questions and issues arising from the text of the Gospel. In addition to these Bonaventure added over two dozen expositions of the spiritual meaning of the text in a manner that he would develop extensively in his *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*. This means that although the commentary on John's gospel was primarily intended for use in university teaching, it was also intended to enable effective preaching, which was one of Bonaventure's principal preoccupations, both as a Franciscan Master and later as Minister General. Fruitful comparison can therefore be made between this commentary and how he himself expounded passages from this Gospel in his many sermons and elsewhere in his writings. Bonaventure's commentary on John's gospel proved to be the most popular and widespread of the scholastic commentaries on this text produced in the thirteenth century.[32]

In one sense, Bonaventure's was a highly traditional approach, deliberately distilling for his pupils the wisdom of distinguished patristic predecessors like Chrysostom and Augustine. He also draws on the homilies of Gregory the Great directly and also through citations from the various *Glossae* available to him. Behind the scenes once again is the influential figure of Hugh of Saint-Cher, his elder Dominican contemporary and commentator. Nonetheless, like Alcuin before him, in his commentary on John's gospel Bonaventure selects and handles his material in

a distinctive and creative manner.[33] He was in no way confined to the formal proceedings of university teaching at the time.[34] Instead, in both his gospel commentaries, Bonaventure 'made the spiritual inhere in the literal' because 'the spiritual meaning was one with the literal'.[35] This originality of approach sprang in part from his commitment to the memory and values of Francis, evident and very fully developed in his Luke commentary, but also evident where appropriate in the John commentary as well, as, for example, in indicating the relative poverty of Jesus and his disciples when confronted by the hungry crowds at the feeding of the five thousand. Both the commentaries on Luke and John prove to be 'treatises on gospel poverty in a lecture framework'.[36] In his spiritual applications, however, Bonaventure went far beyond Hugh of Saint-Cher, and it is in these and some of his replies to questions commonly raised in the university environment that his originality of approach is apparent.[37]

The most notable thing about Bonaventure's *Commentary on the Gospel of John* is its Christological focus, as this Gospel is about the revealing of the hidden nature and glory of Christ. Bonaventure divided the text of the Gospel into two unequal parts: the Word of God *in se* (John 1:1-5); and the Word of God Incarnate (John 1:6-21:25). Within the latter section there are three parts: the Incarnation (John 1:6-11:46); the Passion (John 11:47-19:42); and the Resurrection (John 20:1-21:25). He outlined the reason for this in his prologue to the gospel commentary. Bonaventure praised the Evangelist, whom he identified as John, for his holiness of life, his clarity of understanding and his excellence as a teacher. His faithfulness as a servant of the Lord was confirmed by his being entrusted with the care of Mary, the mother of Jesus, at the crucifixion. The Evangelist was the beneficiary of the direct teaching of Jesus and also the subsequent anointing of the Holy Spirit. His life was utterly committed to Christ, who loved him in a very special way as a friend. For Bonaventure and his contemporaries, the author of the Gospel, the letters of John and Revelation was the same person, a prophetic seer of great holiness and wisdom, as well as an authoritative apostolic teacher. 'The gospel of John is sublime since it deals with sublime matters, namely, the Incarnate Word according to his two natures.'[38] Based on personal experience of Jesus, in his life, dying and resurrection, this witness offers a sure path to belief and salvation, as he says at the end of the Gospel.[39] If the Gospels

are the most important part of Scripture for Christians, then this Gospel is the most important of the Gospels by virtue of its teaching about the twofold nature of Christ.[40] It makes explicit much that is only implicit in the other Gospels and it helps to interpret their meaning.

Bonaventure's extensive comments on the hidden moral or spiritual meanings of gospel events often provide glimpses of his spiritual theology embedded throughout this commentary. There is, for example, an elaborate exposition of the significance of the first miracle of Jesus at the wedding in Cana of Galilee.[41] The third day represents the new age of grace that supersedes the Law, turning its water into wine. What is hidden is now being made clear as 'fear is changed into love': divine promises are being fulfilled throughout the Gospels. The wedding signifies the marriage of God and the human soul, as Jesus stands at the door and knocks. Meanwhile the prayers of Mary enable the springs of compunction to open up so that the soul becomes filled with the water of repentant tears. Compunction is nurtured by honest reflection leading to repentance, recognising human emptiness and vulnerability to sin and evil. Only then can the water of compunction be transformed by grace into the wine of eternal life.

Sometimes it is an incidental paragraph that reveals a great deal in a response to a pertinent question. Commenting on the Lord's answer to Nicodemus indicating the manner of his death, Bonaventure suggests that Jesus presented the mystery of his being 'lifted up' like the serpent in the desert as something 'honourable, credible and secret'.[42] It would protect Nicodemus against scandal, induce faith and so become a mystery to be cherished in love after careful meditation.[43] Commenting on Jesus sitting at the well of Sychar, Bonaventure provides a rich tapestry of texts to illuminate the nature of the water of grace that will flow from Christ.[44] This is fourfold in terms of its cleansing, wisdom, grace and life; and these gifts will only flow downwards to those who are humble. Jesus as a preacher kindled a spark in the Samaritan woman to enable her consent and her faith, so that she might receive his promises and do his will.[45]

The curing of the official's son at the seventh hour[46] prompts a lengthy discussion by Bonaventure of the 'hours' in the life of Christ, who is the 'dayspring from on high'.[47] He provides a characteristic and useful framework of memory for the purposes

of teaching and preaching. The first hour is the self-emptying in the Incarnation inducing humility; the second is the nativity, directing us towards Christ's poverty; the third is his circumcision, which enjoins our obedience; the fourth is his shining forth to the Gentiles by his generous teaching of all. The fifth hour is his presentation in the temple, moving us to grateful prayer; the sixth is his baptism, which purifies from sin and illumines us with divine light and life; the seventh is his temptation, which mortifies the flesh through fasting. The eighth hour is his passion, which quenches human anger and sustains patience; the ninth is Christ's descent into the darkness of hell to rescue lost humanity by his mercy and compassion poured out on the Cross. The tenth hour is his repose in the tomb, offering peace at the last; the eleventh is his resurrection, which frees human beings from the old life of sin and opens the door to eternal life. The twelfth hour signifies the Ascension of Christ, by which we are called from the love of earthly things to the desire for the eternal glory of heaven. Each of these stages is corroborated by Bonaventure with suitable citations from Scripture.

The self-declaration of Jesus in the temple during the Feast of Tabernacles provoked some sharp questioning.[48] How could the Holy Spirit flow from the 'belly' of a person, for only God can give the Spirit, not a human person however holy? Citing Chrysostom, Bonaventure affirms that divine grace is like a flowing river or a tide within; for 'it flows from God and makes humans flow back to God'. The 'belly' in Scripture signifies the heart that overflows with grace within. The presence of the Holy Spirit is clearly evident throughout Scripture: manifest in the prophets and their miracles; more manifest in the ministry of Jesus and his breathing upon the apostles after his resurrection; most manifest after the Ascension and on the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit was given in full abundance to indwell human nature. It is this universal outpouring that Jesus predicted here as a consequence of his death on the Cross.

In his consideration of Jesus as the light of the world, Bonaventure melds together a range of traditional teaching with a firm anchorage in Scripture.[49] Christ enlightens all born into the world in a hidden way, but now quite openly by his teaching. Those who follow him bring their thinking into obedience to him. Those who serve him in this way do not walk in darkness but will come to a vision of divine glory. This is a promise for the future;

but it is also available to some degree now, for, as the Psalmist says, 'in your light shall we see light'.[50] Christians walk now by faith rather than by sight, as the light of Christ is veiled by his flesh; for no human being could bear the reality of his divinity otherwise.

Commenting on the contrast between a thief, a hireling and a shepherd in John 10, Bonaventure says that, whereas a hireling will actually guard the sheep as part of his contract, a thief comes, like heretics, to tear apart and to destroy by lies. Hirelings may be of two kinds: those who act for money, who have to be tolerated but not approved; and those who serve for an eternal reward, who may be supported and encouraged. 'However, they are not to be completely extolled, as only those who serve solely out of love are to be highly exalted.'[51] A Christian pastor, however, whose life and ministry is called to be sacrificial, may have to be willing to die for the flock by turning something good into something better. In some circumstances, he or she may have to free it from imminent danger, even to the point of accepting death on their behalf. A sign of this disposition is the immediate willingness to sell possessions in order to care for the poor.[52] Such a ministry is joyful because sacrificial, and sacrificial because joyful.

Considering why Christ delayed initially going to Lazarus, who was dying of his illness, Bonaventure gives a fascinating analysis of the nature of suffering and its meaning. The restoration of integrity by grace is accomplished by willing acceptance of the suffering of humility, repentance, patience and compassion. This entails flight from the sufferings caused by sin: from greed, carnal pleasure, arrogance and obstinacy. Christian discipleship, however, is a costly path, resisting the evil of sin, enduring the suffering of pain, pursuing what is good and persevering in it with the help of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes this will result in suffering from the lies and calumnies of others; but such suffering may also be part of the redemptive process in union with Christ and a purgation of the soul, which in the end redounds to the glory of God.[53] Each step of this way is illustrated by Bonaventure with a suitable citation from Scripture, so that this exposition serves as an epitome of much wider teaching.

Bonaventure applies similar insight as he expounds the spiritual significance of the raising of Lazarus from the tomb in John 11.[54] As in the Garden of Eden, Jesus calls to the sinner, 'where are you?' thus revealing the state of spiritual death. Then

he removes the stone from the tomb, lifting the burden of guilt and sin off a person. He commands the person to come forth, confessing their sins openly, no longer hiding. Finally, he bids his disciples to unbind the person, which signifies the sacrament of confession and absolution. Bonaventure also points out that Lazarus was still impeded in three ways as he emerged from the tomb: the covering of his face represents the difficulty in seeing and knowing correctly; the bound feet signify the difficulty of willing what is right; while the bound hands signify the difficulty in doing what is right. This passage is typical of the way in which Bonaventure culls material from previous commentators like Augustine and Hugh of Saint-Cher but gives it his own pastoral and spiritual emphasis and development. Once again, he reveals his conviction that hidden within the detail of the stories in the Bible are keys to understanding the nature of reality, divine and human, and the ways of God in redeeming human beings through Christ and by the Holy Spirit.

Commenting on John 15, Bonaventure answers a penetrating question about whether Christ is the Vine in terms of his human nature or of his divine nature: on the one hand, human beings are joined to him and share in his life; but that life springs from his divine being. How can this be?[55] This gives him an opportunity to outline his distinctive understanding of Christ as the mediator, who unites God and human nature: indeed, because he alone is both God and human, only he can be the mediator. Christ is therefore the Vine because this union of human and divine in him makes possible the infusing of divine life into human life, so that 'the moisture of grace overflows into all the saints', who are engrafted in him.

This has implications also for the nature of God's love that is mediated through Christ. For Christ offers to human beings the gratuitous love of God that he receives from the Father, saying, 'as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you'.[56] Bonaventure proceeds to elaborate on the extent and nature of the love of Christ for humanity.[57] He gave his life as a burning self-sacrifice, revealing the love of the Father 'who gave his only Son'.[58] Christ's love exceeds that of a mother for her child, or of a husband for his wife, even of the soul for the body, confirming by the Resurrection the words of the Song of Songs that 'love is as strong as death'.[59] Bonaventure's lengthy and masterly exposition of the prayer of Jesus in John 17 is a detailed elaboration of these themes.

The wealth of Bonaventure's thought and insight may be discerned by careful reading of this commentary alongside the text of the Gospel. His fidelity to the received tradition of patristic and monastic exegesis is never in doubt, and on many occasions he indicates his sources as he weighs one interpretation quite openly and critically with another. The many references in the original Quaracchi edition of the Latin text, published at the end of the nineteenth century in Italy, and those highlighted in the recent English translation by Karris, further amplify the sense of Bonaventure's mastery of this tradition, as well as his exhaustive knowledge of the Bible. His dialogue with Scripture reveals his great gifts as a teacher and person of prayer, alongside his determination that all theology should lead to holiness of life that is rooted in the love of God as revealed in Christ. The memory of Francis gave this sense of the living voice of Scripture its immediacy, authority and urgency. Bonaventure bent all his powers to its elucidation and articulation in everything that he wrote.