

6. THE GOSPELS PROVIDE THE STANDARD FOR CHRISTIAN FAITH

Jesus is the fullness of God's revelation

The first book of the Bible is the Book of Genesis. There is a tendency for a new reader of the Bible to begin with it. Such an approach is inadvisable. To appreciate the Bible, you should never begin with Old Testament writings, for they were originally intended for ancient Israelites. Their contents are culturally and historically conditioned. Their thoughts and practices were in many ways incompatible with the teachings of Jesus. For beginners who want to read the Bible, it is imperative to begin with the four Books of the Gospels, namely Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

The Inadequacy of Old Testament Mentality

In general, Old Testament books express the ancient understanding of God, faith, worship, and morality. Their faith was amiable and their religious zeal strong. Yet, their understanding of faith and morality was often distorted and inadequate. For example, ancient Israelites, as seen in the Old Testament books, were racist and nationalistic. To safeguard their survival and development, they discriminated and fought against the "Gentiles". If we were to follow the ancient way, we would be just as narrowly nationalistic, and this deviates from the outlook of Christ. The Gospel clearly shows Jesus transcending the preoccupation with race, nationality, and social status. Jesus explicitly taught that everyone has the dignity of a child of God, for "He makes his sun to shine on bad and

good people alike and gives rain to those who do good and to those who do evil" (Matt 5:45). And by example, he associated himself with the Gentiles, including the Romans and the Samaritans.

It is mentioned in the Old Testament that revenge is necessary when someone is offended or hurt. Their position was "love your neighbours and hate your enemies!" (Mt 5:43) They believed that not seeking revenge was a sign of weakness, and only retaliation can fulfil justice. Subsequently, Old Testament writings show them to be slightly more restrained in their attitude towards seeking revenge, thus advocating "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, foot for foot", which was less than relentless revenge (Dt 19:21). However, the retaliatory mentality had not changed.

Jesus invited us to surpass the impulsiveness for revenge. He said, "Do not take revenge on someone who wrongs you. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, let him slap your left cheek too." Furthermore, "if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile" (Mt 5:39-41). He also taught, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may become the sons of your Father in heaven" (Mt 5:44-45). Jesus introduced forgiveness as the basic attitude for resolving grudges in interpersonal relationships.

The judgment on the truth-value of Old Testament writings is by the standard of Jesus. For example, to correct the theological errors of the former, we must refer to the teaching of Jesus. Jesus rectified the Old Testament misconception of God as a militant warrior, a stringent law enforcer, and a nationalistic God. He clearly

taught that God was the heavenly Father of all man. When praying, he taught us to say, “Our Father in heaven” (Mt 6:9). Our heavenly Father is close to us, loving, and protecting. This understanding is made very clear with the explicit teaching of Jesus our Lord!

Jesus, the Fullness of God’s Self-revelation

In the Letter to the Hebrews, it is said, “In the past, God spoke to our ancestors many times and in many ways through the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us through his Son” (Heb 1:1). Jesus is the Son of God. He is one with the Father, and through him, we have the fullest of God’s self-revelation. The apostles had seen “his glory, the glory which he received as the Father’s only Son” (1 Jn 1:14). The Catholic Church invites us to know, believe, love, and follow Jesus and to be his disciples. When we know him, we also know the Father (Jn 14:7).

Being a disciple means to be with Jesus, the Master, to learn from him and to put into practice what we have learnt. Jesus said, “The Kingdom of God is near! Repent and believe the Good News!” (Mk 1:15). In this proclamation, Jesus gives two basic commands: to repent and to believe the Good News.

The Gospel means first and foremost, Jesus himself, and second, his preaching. The first four Books of the New Testament are accounts of the personality and life of Jesus, and they are known as the Books of the Gospel. They constitute the centrality of the whole Bible. To know Christ, we need to be familiar with the Gospels and meditate on the readings. To be ignorant of the Gospels

is to be ignorant of Christ. If we read the Gospels and pray often, we will be able to establish a close relationship with Jesus. Conversely, when we have established this close relationship, we will pray even more fervently, sincerely accept his teachings in the Gospels, put them into practice, and become Christ-like. This is our Christian ideal, just as St. Paul said, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

Read the Gospels

Which Gospel among the four should a new Christian or a non-believer start reading? Any of the four Gospels would be a good starting point for a new Christian because all of them focus on Jesus Christ, who is the fullest of God's self-revelation to man.

My preference and my recommendation for new readers is to start with the Gospel of Luke. Luke was written for the Gentiles, the non-Jews. It shows a compassionate Jesus who reaches out to all, especially the marginalised, such as the poor, the sick, the tax-collector, and the women. The narrations are easy to understand, and readers can immediately experience the compassion of Jesus.

The book of Mark is also a great introduction to Jesus Christ. It is the shortest among the four Gospels, and the presentation of the actions and sayings of Jesus are direct and concise. The Gospel of Matthew is slightly more difficult for beginners since it emphasises the historicity and Jewish lineage of Jesus, making many references to the Jewish religious notions and images.

The Gospel of John is very profound. It emphasises the love of God as found in Jesus Christ, and if you read the first chapter of John, you will discover that it starts with God's plan for man even before the creation. Thus, John is comparatively more difficult to understand for it contains lots of theological discussion.

Note that the Gospels are not biographies in the modern sense of the word. Rather, they are testimonies of faith. They convey a message about Jesus, about his significance to the readers and thus are both a preaching to non-believers and a catechesis to Christians.

Do not read the Bible in a hurry. After the first reading, you should then read with a prayerful heart. Stop and meditate on the words. Pray for the Holy Spirit to reveal the meanings and understanding. As Jesus said in John 16:13, "But when he, the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come." With a prayerful disposition, a Gospel reader will not only know Jesus but also encounter him and grow in intimacy with the Lord.

Conclusion

For anyone who wants to grow in Christian faith, the best way to begin reading the Bible is to start with the Books of the Gospels. After which, he should read the other writings of the New Testament. Only then should he read the Old Testament books. It is also advisable to attend biblical courses such as "Interpretation of the Bible", "Introduction to the Bible", and "Introduction to the Gospels" to familiarise oneself with the art of understanding the Bible. The biblical writings are not

verbatim revelations from God. Rather, they are His inspiration. The art of biblical interpretation will enable the readers to have a more adequate understanding of the books and avoid a disastrous literal interpretation of the Bible.