

6.4 Scripture: Word, Image, Tradition

Aim

- To examine the role of scriptures in the process of divine-human communication
- To familiarize students with the evolution of the concept of Word and Image in the scriptures

Materials Required

- A copy of the Bible

Procedure

Explore the meaning of the various passages on the theme: 'Word' and 'Image'

Divide the class into four groups who will communicate Lk 4:18 to the following groups:

- a). Charismatic Christians
- b). Urban wealthy Christians
- c). Rural simple Christians
- d). Teen/Youth Christians

Let each group share how they are going to carry out their communication.

Input

The Bible is among the numerous primary sources of God's communication with human beings. However, God's communication far exceeds the written text of the Bible. Revelation encompasses all the various means God created an encounter with people.

These encounters are testified to by witnesses (*testamentum*). When these testimonies are collected in writing, we have the *scriptura* (scriptures). So there is first the experience (testament) before the expression in text (scripture).

Faith is not only what is written (the *sola scriptura* of Martin Luther). It is far beyond the visible written text. The Bible is written testimony. It combines both word and testament.

'Word' in the Bible denotes a person. A person's word reflects his or her true self, identity, intention and personality. Many times in the OT, we come across the phrase 'the word of the Lord...' God gave his word (himself) in covenant with the patriarchs, with Israel in the Decalogue (10 words).

Jesus comes as this Word, which was with the Father and through Him all things were made (Jn 1). Jesus never saw or called himself as 'Word of God'. The NT concept 'word' has roots in the Greek *logos* and when Christianity left its Jewish influence and inserted herself in the Hellenistic world, the concept of *logos* as a person, a pre-existent being with God was applied to Jesus Christ- 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.' (Jn 1:1).

From a communication point of view, the early Christians were more interested in personal relationship, an intimate experience and substance of meaning of Jesus' words than just verbal precision of what was said, to be put in writing.

According to Pierre Babin, we should avoid reducing the word of Jesus Christ to accurate written word for the Gospel (Word).

Meticulous following of the letter of the law kills the spirit of the law. The Gospels as we have them today are as a result of a response to development in the cultural and ecclesial context of their time.

The word and spirit, the letter and proclamation, go hand in hand and should not be separated or taken out of their context.

There is no communication from the letter alone because it might conceal or deceive the recipients. This is seen in the Human Communication theory of McLuhan. He posits that 'the print technology, by focusing on the human mind on linear print, creates a breach between visual experience and auditory experience'. Written

word (text) reduces experience to only one sense (sense of sight) and this distorts and fragments human perception and sensibility. This alienates the other senses and restricts people to a universe of fallacious abstraction.

In this way, Hand-Rued Weber suggests that focus on the stages of development of the Bible: oral preaching, illuminated manuscript, a liturgical drama and finally a printed book is necessary for understanding the Bible. Our concentration on literary culture makes us see the Bible only as a printed book. We must be aware that till recently, western theology and theological teaching have been marked by this literary genre.

When we, in our contemporary thought pattern, subject the Bible and for that matter Christian revelation to an exaggerated literal genre, we run the risk of the gradual disappearance of the memory, the decline of community in celebration and participation.

A special mention needs to be made of our African context, where less emphasis is placed on the written word. The word is what is spoken and listened to. The word is acted out in drama, sang in songs, presented in dancing and drama, accompanied by giggles, clapping and cheers.

This makes a better impression and impact on the peoples than a written text which appeals only to the intellect and less to emotion or imagination.

Basically, the foundation of the Bible is oral transmission. The commandments were to be listened to and carried out. (Dt, 6, 1). Later prophets would proclaim the word from God to the people, who were to heed it for life or ignore it to their own peril.

King Josiah in 622 BC discovered the law and urged it to be proclaimed in public (2 Kgs 23: 2). St. Paul's letters were not rewritten for the Christians, but read publicly (I Tim. 4:13). The kerygma, in which the word of God prominently features, was an oral proclamation.

Basically, this message was heard, remembered, understood, taught and proclaimed, celebrated and translated into life. The writing and fixing of the canons of the Bible did not affect this practice of oral transmission. The written word only served as an aid for memorizing and reciting, for proclamation and teaching, for study and celebration.

Word and Image

God's revelation (Jesus) can be experienced to us in multi-sensory forms.

People can see Jesus (Jn 14:4)

People can hear him (Mk 1:11)

People can touch him (Lk 23:39)

In the Psalms, we are invited to taste and see how good the Lord is (34:9).

John describes it in a very graphic way: 'that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life ... and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you... (I Jn. 1,1-2). The same testimony is presented by Peter on the transfiguration and the need to trust in prophecy (I Pt 1: 16-21).

God's revelation, especially Jesus Christ comes to us in this Word-Image form. Jesus takes a concrete human form, he comes as a sign, an icon. At his birth, the angels indicate him with a sign: This will be the sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger'.

However, a sign is always in the realm of belief and deeper faith, not to test like the Pharisees. (cf. Mt. 12, 38-39; 16, 4; Lk, 11, 29-30)

Art: a medium of Christian communication

Judaism is strongly against visual representations, as seen in the 2nd of the 10 commandments. The condemnation of the idolatry of the golden calf in Ex. 32 is another example. Destruction of images and suppression of all 'high places' was a major aspect of the reforms of King Josiah during the 7th century before Christ.

The tone of condemnation changes in the Middle Ages, with Basil the Great teaching that honour to images (icons) is really honour to who they represent and Thomas Aquinas saying images are not worshipped since they are mere things, but they draw us to God incarnate.

For the unlettered, Pope Gregory (6th century) and William Durandus recommends pictures and ornaments in churches as their lessons and scriptures.

The Protestant Reformation of the 16th and 17th century brought a violent opposition to images and icons, claiming they were violating scriptures and distracting worshippers. They opposed all major signs and symbols- sacraments, altars, relics, clerical habits and statues. Their interest was only in the written text of the Bible.



African communication through signs and symbols

Signs and Symbols are essential to the African communication mechanism. Without them, communication is next to impossible. Through art (signs and symbols) a whole spectrum of network relations are created between human beings and with the cosmos. Things are not just written down in pure dry text, but are symbolically represented in art. These expressions are gestures, word (spoken), dance, music, dress, ornamentation, tattoo, make-up, mask, architecture, time and space. By these artistic expressions, human beings become the soul of soulless things and the voice of the voiceless things of the cosmos.

Finally, we have to become aware that God's communication in the world can only be appreciated through symbols, words and signs.

Review

Scripture is God's communication to us, in words and images. Jesus' communication in scripture is more than just words. The written words are final edition of the spoken word. The power of the word is in the speech. That is why scripture in church is not just read, but proclaimed. A proclamation carries power and effect for conversion.

Jesus' communication is graphically present in images and for most people images speak louder than words.

Reflection

- 1 Discuss the biblical position on visual images by giving examples.
- 2 What is the role of art in communicating the Christian message?

Relevant Skills

1. Discuss the controversy that arose during the Reformation on Word and Image.
2. Demonstrate how we can use visual art for catechesis with our youth groups or parish community.

Reference

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Resources

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Duffy Paul. *Word of Life in Media and Gospel*. Victoria: St. Paul's Publications, 1991.