

Raniero Cantalamessa : The Mystery of God's Word

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Notes by Alison Morgan November 2007

Short book (92pp) containing 8 talks on different aspects of the Word of God. Brilliant!

1. Jesus began to preach

- the mystery of the Word of God in salvation history.

After his baptism, Jesus began to preach about repentance. What concerns us is not so much the things about which God speaks to us, as the fact that he does speak to us. Ps 50.1, the Lord has spoken. The Word of God should never become a mere object, but remain the subject speaking to us with divine authority. God speaks; yet we need to pray to him that he would speak to us – 1 Sam 3.9, 'speak, Lord, for your servant is listening'. Song of Songs: 'let us hear your voice!'

'Jesus began to preach' – at a specific point in time; autumn of AD 27 to spring of AD 30). It's the time of the preaching of the kingdom, which preceded the Passion – the gospels have been described as 'passion-narratives with extended introductions'. This means that the apostles regarded what Jesus said as indispensable for an understanding of what he did.

Heb 1.1-2 – 'in times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through the Son'. Jesus seems to speak on his own account, rather than as a commentator on others (the usual rabbinic practice). Cf Matt 5.12 (you have heard that it was said – but I say to you), Mark 1.22 (he taught as one having authority, not as the scribes), John 7.46 (no one has ever spoken like this man). The key word used of him is 'authority'.

And yet Jesus insisted his teaching was not his own but God's (John 7.16, 14.24). It is his Father's; and yet he and the Father are one (Jn 10.30). Mt 11.27 says 'no one knows the Father except the Son' – ie no one could now there was a Father, that God is a Father, before Jesus revealed it. We have a new prophetic message.

Jesus read Isaiah and said the scripture was fulfilled (Lk 4.21); not just this one, but all of them (2 Cor 1.19). The Lamb who receives the book and breaks open its seals (Rev 5-6) is a plastic image conveying that by his death Jesus has made the scriptures his own and only he can completely explain them. They have become his book. So even the law, prophets and psalms speak of him. The writer to the Hebrews applied the psalm 'today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts' to Christians (Heb 3.11). How do we listen? The Word has ceased to exist as event but continues to exist as sacrament. In the OT the Word (*dabar*) is a word-event, a word that creates a situation, that sets off something new in history. The word-events continue till John the Baptist (Luke 3.1) and then stop; instead of the word coming down, the word is made flesh. We never meet the phrase 'the word of God came to Jesus' because he IS the word of God. John of the Cross said God had spoken to us once and for all by giving us his Son; nothing is left to reveal. *Jesus is thus the final event of the Word of God in history; he is that word 'issuing forth from the mouth of God' that, like the rain, has come down upon the earth and watered it so it can bear seed to sow and bread to eat, and, once everything has been completed that God sent him to do, returns to him, saying to the Father, 'I have accomplished the work you gave me to do'.* (Is 55, Jn 17). The Word's stint in history closes with the ascension; but the Spirit that was at work in it lasts forever. There will be no more word-events in the Church; but there are word-sacraments. Word sacraments are God's word in the bible, which become active reality every time the church proclaims them and the Spirit rekindles them in the hearts of those who hear them.

Augustine says the sacrament is 'a word that you see' (*verbum visibile*) and the word is 'a sacrament that you hear' (*sacramentum audibile*). The Word we read is a material sign; but through faith and the HS we enter through these signs into contact with the living truth and the will of God. The word of God can catch fire.

2. Go and proclaim the gospel

- the Word of God in the Church

We can't exhaust the fountain of water which is the word, or capture it; only drink repeatedly.

1. *The Church is borne by the Word*

The Word of God has now become the Word of Christ.

Deut 32.47 'this word is your life'. Israel is borne by the word of God - when all other resources fail during the exile, the Word appears as the unique support.

The Church is the house built on the rock, and the rock is the Word (Mt 7.25). It is presented as a living reality, which grows, spreads, gains influence (Acts 6.7; 12.24; 19.20). Paul says it sounds forth like a shout (1 Thess 1.8).

When the NT says Christians have been born anew through the living Word of God (1 Pet 1.23; James 1.18), it means they have begun living in contact with this mysterious force which is the Word.

Ambrose: *the Word of God is the vital sustenance of the soul; it feeds it, pastures it, and guides it; nothing can keep the human soul alive except the Word of God.* In ancient times, the 10 Words (debarim) were kept in the Ark.

2. *The Church bears the Word*

The Church is the new ark, keeping the words safe. It does this through apostolic tradition, 'the understanding attached to the Scriptures by the Church'. It's like bread already chewed by the tradition. Tradition is not dead, but alive; a living reality (Word) cannot be kept in dead surroundings. 'Outside the living environment of Tradition, the Scriptures would be a dead body, a book like any other.. to be studied with all the rigor of the historico-philological method and nothing more'. Keeping it alive is the Church's duty.

3. *Servants of the Word*

We have to live what we preach – not recommend a liner whilst following in a lifeboat. Preaching is easy; practising is hard. Russian saint Serafim used to say that preaching is as easy as throwing stones from the top of a church tower, whereas putting into practice is as hard as carrying stones to the top of the tower on your back. We should only throw the stones we have carried up. If we can't – most of us can't – then humility is the key; 'I am the voice of one crying'..

4. *But the Word of God is not chained!*

2 Tim 2.9 – that's what matters. We can be chained; it isn't.

The Lord has hidden all his treasures in his Word, so that each of us should find something rich in what we contemplate. . . . Having acquired something rich ourselves, we do not suppose there can be nothing else in the Word of God besides what we ourselves have found. On the contrary, we realize we have only been able to discover one thing among many others. Having been enriched by the Word, we do not imagine the Word has been impoverished thereby; unable to exhaust its riches, we give thanks for its immensity. So rejoice that you have been filled, but do not grieve over the fact that the riches of the Word are more than you can absorb.

Ephraim the Syrian

Jesus did not give us dead words
for us to salt away in little tins
(or big ones),
for us to preserve in rancid oil.
Jesus Christ, my girl,
did not give us word-pickles to keep.
No, he gave us living words to feed...
The words of life,
the living words can only be preserved alive...
On us, weak creatures of flesh, it depends
to keep these words uttered alive in time alive,
to feed them and keep them alive in time.
Mystery of mysteries,
we have been given this privilege,
this excessive, unbelievable privilege,
of preserving the words of life alive...
We are called to feed the word of the Son of God.
Oh penury, oh calamity,
it falls to our Lot,
our duty it is, on us it depends
to make it heard forever and ever,
to make it ring out. . .

Charles Péguy (character personifying the Ch)

3. When I found your words...

- The Word in the life of the proclaimer

1 Kings 19 – we mustn't conclude that the Word always comes as a whisper rather than wind, earthquake, fire. It's about how Elijah receives it – and that it is then transformed within him, and pours out on the people as fire and thunder (cp Sir 48.1). Elijah is the prototype and symbol of those who proclaim the Word of God.

The Word of God comes from silence – the silence of a void, the silence of Nazareth. Sending out the disciples, Jesus told them to greet no one on the way (Lk 10.4); the Word of God has to be kept distinct from human words. We are vessels (2 Cor 4.7). Augustine: 'suppose God wanted to fill you with honey; if you are full of vinegar, where will you put the honey?' Would you proclaim the Word of God? You have to get it each time from the arms of the Crucified.

Joy characterises the moment of meeting between proclaimer and Word – Jer 15.16. Scripture describes it as a book offered to be eaten – eg Ezek 2.9-3.3. In Rev 10.8-10 it turns sour in the stomach – due to the nature of the particular message. There is a difference between reading and swallowing a book. We aren't decanting it; we are incarnating it. That can be tough – cp 2 Cor 4.12, death in us, life in you. There are 2 reasons – first is sin (Isaiah 6.5, unclean lips; 1 Tim 1.15 Paul). James says the Word is like a mirror (James 1.23) or a sword – we have to look at ourselves in the mirror, and use the sword on ourselves. Second reason is that if God's love for humanity runs through us, so does his pain. And that's hard to keep in – cp Elijah, Jeremiah (4.19, 6.11).

4. We preach Christ Jesus as Lord

- The content of Christian preaching

2 Corinthians is the letter about preaching. The change from the age of Jesus preaching to the age of Jesus preached occurred at the resurrection. Jeremiah wrote his prophecies on a scroll which the king burned. God told him to rewrite it and keep it safe. This is a type of Jesus. The gospel is the scroll dictated by God through Jesus; human beings erased the scroll on the cross, but God has rewritten it by raising Jesus from the dead. He is as powerful now as he was before his death.

The word of God acts just by being heard (Rom 10.17; parable of sower). The power contained in the name of Jesus becomes active through the faith of the proclaimer; so relationship with Jesus is the key. 'Human beings are not converted by having truths about Jesus present to them but by having Jesus himself presented to them' – they are asking, as some Greeks asked the apostles, 'we want to see Jesus' – John 12.21.

5. For every careless word...

- Word of God and words of ours

Matt 12.36 – on the DoJ people will render an account for every careless word they speak'. *Verbum otiosum* – what does he mean? The Gk word is *argon*, ineffective (*a + ergos*, ie not-working). Not hard to see what Jesus meant if we compare this adjective with the one in the Bible that constantly characterizes the Word of God: *energes* – 'efficacious', that which works, produces a result (*ergos*). It's the same adj which produces the word 'energetic'. Eg 1 Thess 2.13, they have heard the word of God not as human words but as the Word of God which is at work in those who believe. The difference between the Word of God and human words is the difference between the Word that works and the word that does not, between the efficacious Word and the empty word. The Word of God is living and effective – *energes* – Heb 4.12.

So the useless word we will have to account for is not any old useless word – it's the empty word uttered by people who ought to be uttering the 'energetic' words of God. It's the word of the false prophet, drawn from within himself. It's sterile. It does not act. God's word is not like this, it's like fire, like a hammer – cf Jer 23.16, 28-30).

False prophets are those who falsify the word of God (2 Cor 2.17, 4.2) – the word Paul uses means ‘water down’. They dilute and weaken it in the thousands of words issuing from their own hearts. I falsify it when I dress it up, don’t allow it to live in me. We are meant to turn the water into wine, not wine into water, into dead letter and idle chatter. Cp Rom 1.16, 2 Tim 2.15-16.

How can the world perceive the energetic Word of God from the hubbub of useless words emanating from the Church? People ask us for bread, and we give them stones.

Jesus never said useless words. His words were all Spirit and life (Jn 6.63). Paul rails against those who seek to dissolve the kerygma of the cross into words of human wisdom (1 Cor). The Word of God revolts against being turned into ideology – what is left once the current from the Word of God has been cut off, once it’s been unplugged from the personal reality of God. We use it to support our projects; the reverse is true.

The Word of God is rare in these days (cp 1 Sam 3.1). What we need is not biblical quotations but prophetic words, words emerging from suffering and prayer, which bring the hearer face to face with the presence and lordship of Christ. So Peter: ‘whoever p[reaches, let it be with the words of God’ – 1 Pe 4.11. Who is qualified for this? no one – 2 Cor 2.16, 2 Cor 4.7. We hold the treasure in earthen vessels.

Jesus Christ, my girl,
did not come to tell us fairy tales...
He did not make the journey down to earth
To come and ask us riddles and crack jokes.
He had not got the time to lark about...
He did not expend his life...
In coming to tell us nonsense stories.

Charles Péguy

6. You will receive power from the Holy Spirit

- the Holy Spirit and the proclamation of the Word

Acts 1.7-8. The inner reality of evangelisation, its soul, is the HS. The fundamental rule of Christian proclamation is to preach Christ in the Holy Spirit.

1. *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me*

Jesus’ preaching began after his baptism, Luke 4. That is why he receives the Spirit. Isaiah 11.4: *he shall strike the ruthless with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked.* When he speaks, Satan falls like a thunderbolt from the sky; demons are as though scorched by his words and come out crying ‘you have come to destroy us!’. The Spirit also gifts Jesus not to become dejected.

What happened in Jesus happens now in the Body. Acts lives out the same proclamation – the Spirit has anointed me to bring good news to the poor! Jesus had said the Spirit would give his apostles an ‘irresistible’ word (Lk 21.15, Matt 10.20; Mk 13.11). Stephen’s adversaries ‘could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he spoke’ (Acts 6.10). See also Acts 5.32 – we are witnesses of these things, as is the holy Spirit that God has given to those who obey him. So evangelisation is the result of the human, visible testimony of the apostles/the Church, and the divine, invisible testimony of the Spirit acting behind it. An evangelisation without the quickening breath of the HS is like a sharp sword which is left aside and never brandished. It will not cut to the heart (Heb 4.12, Eph 6.17).

2. **The silence of the Spirit**

Paul warned against preaching words of human wisdom (1 Cor 2.5). Precisely what he feared has become about – even though our wisdom is of a theological type... Addresses based on human wisdom are persuasive and ask for intellectual assent; Christian preaching claims assent of a spiritual order, not of the letter. We in the West have witnessed a massive relapse into the letter and the flesh. Rationalism prevails and demands the message be presented in dialectical form – ie, subjected to discussion and research so it can fit into the general, philosophically acceptable picture of an effort on the part of human nature to understand itself and the universe. Research, and not truth, has become the absolute – God is accepted on condition he be a God who is researched but never found, and Jesus on condition he be a revealer of God but not the revelation of God. We dislike certainty because it demands a response. Obedience is the real issue... So the idea has taken precedence

over reality and over life; idealism is the result. We might compare the Enlightenment centuries with the 2 or 3 centuries of silence which preceded the coming of Jesus.

3. A new Pentecost

Joy – this is changing. In Vatican II Pope John XXIII prayed for a new Pentecost for the Church, and said '*The Holy Spirit is the source and motor of renewal in Christ's Church*'. His predecessor Paul VI had emphasized the role of the HS in the work of evangelisation.

But it's not enough to talk about the HS. He is not 'an idea or a theme, which we scatter here and there in our addresses as one would sugar on a pudding'; he is 'the invisible force permeating all from within'. How do we let him act?

- Obedience – when we surrender ourselves to God, he surrenders himself and entrusts us with his Spirit and his power. 'The power of the Spirit in the proclaimer is proportionate to the harshness of the cross that individual carries'.
- Prayer – in prayer and on our knees we should ask God to reveal to us the word he has selected and stored in his heart for a particular situation and people, and after this, at our desk, we should put all our culture and experience at the service of this word
- Community – living contact with a praying community is most important, in which the gifts of the Spirit are lived and exercised. Eg Acts, Peter and John are forbidden to preach by the Sanhedrin, and it's only the following prayer meeting which realises the witness must continue (Acts 4).

7. Welcome the Word

- The word of God in the personal life of the Christian

There are 3 fundamental levels of the Word – historical (the Word-event, chaps 1-2), sacramental (the Word-sacrament, Word as it acts in the Church today, 3-6) and moral (Word as moral and spiritual principle and guide for the believer 7-8).

James urges us to be doers, not hearers only (James 1). Peter calls the Word imperishable seed, pure milk (1 Pet 1). See also Rom 2.13 and the parable of the sower. We are to welcome the Word; reflect on the Word, put the Word into practice – 3 stages of the Christian journey. Kierkegaard observes that if one were to wait, before allowing oneself to be personally summoned by the Word, until one has solved all the problems connected with the scriptural text, the variants, and the divergences of opinion among the scholars, one would never be done. Indeed, such dallying becomes a ruse to defend oneself against the Word of God. It's been given so that we can put it into practice, not so that we may exercise ourselves in exegesis of its obscurities (!). The medieval monastics were specialists in the living of the Word. Gregory the Great: 'scripture is a letter from God Almighty to his creature; in it we come to know God's heart through God's words'. St Francis used to spend his nights repeating 'Who are you, Lord, and who am I?'

Kierkegaard – suppose the mirror of God reveals a bad habit (gambling). If the gambler says to himself 'I shall never gamble again' he is lost. If he says 'I will be allowed to gamble for the rest of my life, but not tonight', then he will not gamble any more. The Word of God becomes the instrument that prunes our lives – his resolve comes from the work of the Spirit in him today, not from the arrogance of his heart.

8. The letter brings death but the Spirit gives life

- The spiritual interpretation of the Bible

The Spirit works within the sacred writer, so that he can welcome the Word of God and incarnate it in human language – as Mary does with the Word which becomes flesh in her. The Fathers said God is like a musician who touches the strings of the lyre and makes it vibrate; the sound is the work of the musician, but would not exist but for the strings. In the case of scripture, God moves not inanimate strings but free ones (the will,

mind). We talk about the inerrancy of scripture – but biblical inspiration is the basis for much more than the mere (negative) inerrancy of the Word of God; it's the basis for its inexhaustibility, its divine force and vitality.

The bible is *theopneustos*, inspired/breathed by God. This is not passive but active. The scriptures present God's word in unalterable form, and make the voice of the Spirit sound again and again in the words of the prophets and apostles (*Dei verbum* conciliar constitution). Gregory the Great said the Word of God was like a flint, cold to the touch; but when struck by the steel it gives off sparks and lights the fire. The words of scripture stay cold if one limits them to their literal meaning, but if inspired by the Lord one strikes with an attentive mind, they will give vent to the fire of mystic meanings.

How do we approach the scriptures so as to release the Spirit that they contain? We can't discover the spirit in scripture except through the letter, by way of the concrete human dress that the Word of God has assumed in the various books and inspired authors. We can't discover the divine meaning except by setting out from the human meaning, the intention of the author. So study and research pays dividends, as long as we don't stop there. We are experiencing the danger of reducing scripture to a single dimension; of admiring the mirror, concentrating on the letter (James) instead of reading the word. Many scholars confine themselves to the historico-critical method. Yet to claim to understand it by studying it exclusively with the instrument of historico-philological analysis is like claiming to discover what the Eucharist is through a chemical analysis of the consecrated host. It represents the first step only.

If you don't use a limb for a long time, it needs exercise before it can be used again. So it is with us; we need retraining in how to use the Bible. Reading the scriptures without the Holy Spirit would be like opening a book in the dark.

Tradition is a sounding board for scripture - like the body of a violin in which the sound takes shape. What would be the point of the Song of Songs, without the resonance it has acquired in the liturgy and spirituality of the Church?

I once heard a man give this testimony in public: He had reached the last stage of alcoholism; he couldn't hold out for more than an hour or two without a drink; wherever he happened to be, travelling, in the train, or at work, his first thought was where could he get some wine. His wife, who was there too, said she had reached the brink of despair and could see no way out for herself and her three children, except death. Someone invited them to some Bible readings. There was one word in particular which, heard by chance, made a deep impression on him and which for many years served as a rope to draw him up from the abyss. Each time he read it over, it was like a fresh flood of heat and strength, until he was completely cured. When he tried to tell us what that word was, his voice broke and he was so overcome with emotion that he could not manage to complete the sentence. It was the verse in the Song of Songs (1:2) which says, "More delightful is your love than wine." It would have been easy for any "expert" on the Song to show him that the verse had no bearing on his situation and that he was deluding himself, but the man went on repeating, "I was dead and now I am alive. That word gave me back my life!" So, too, the man born blind replied to those who questioned him, "How that may be, I don't know. All I do know is, before I couldn't see and now I can see" (cf. John 9:25).