

Address at the Inauguration of Dr Iain Torrance as President of Princeton Theological Seminary and Professor of Patristics, Thursday 10th March 2005

Faith in the Third Millennium: Reading Scriptures Together

David F. Ford, Regius Professor of Divinity, University of Cambridge

Preface

It is a delight and an honour to be here with you today to celebrate the inauguration of Dr Iain Torrance as President of Princeton Theological Seminary and Professor of Patristics. It seems deeply fitting that he should be here in that double role. Iain's wonderful gift of paying close, patient attention to each person he deals with is united with a comparable and perhaps even rarer gift of paying perceptive, far-sighted attention to institutions, both in their internal workings and in relation to their increasingly complex environments. He has already demonstrated this impressively not only in the Church and in the academy but also in a range of other institutions.

Of these I would single out the British Army. Your new President has held the rank of Major in the British Army, a recognition of many years active service in the Territorial Army, a reserve force that serves on active duty with the regular army. While there he was not only a chaplain who was with his soldiers in all they went through; he also engaged with the structures and culture of the army, and especially its education and its ethics. I remember the Chaplain-General of the Army taking me aside once to explain how important Iain's integration of military, ecclesiastical and educational experience had been as the army rethought the formation of its soldiers for service in situations of great pressure and complexity. I assume that the uniform has now been set aside, but in the years to come it may be worth remembering that your President has done such things.

But Dr Torrance is also to be Professor of Patristics. It is remarkable that he might just as easily have become professor of ethics or of New Testament. Undergirding and pervading his ministry to people and to institutions is his rigorous, thoughtful study of several disciplines. Christian leadership of an institution requires many things, but three increasingly impress themselves upon me as being the conditions for everything else. One is 'the vision thing', the ability to conceive and sustain a truly desirable goal for the flourishing of the institution in the context of dedication to the coming of the Kingdom of God in Church and world. Another is the facing of reality, the perception of what is really going on, and the capacity to

redescribe this reality for people so that they can recognize, through all its confusions, complexities and ambiguities, that this is God's world and that God is with us on our way to God's future for us. The third is the root and inspiration of the other two. It is the calling to be a disciplined, intelligent, imaginative and practical reader and re-reader of scripture and tradition, and to encourage and guide others in that. Iain Torrance combines all three, and typically he has chosen as the theme for his inauguration the most fundamental of them.

Iain and I go back some way together, back to being colleagues at the University of Birmingham in the 1980's. Since then we have been in different universities. We have had some golden meetings in Aberdeen, in Cambridge and at conferences, but they have been all too few. I want now to attempt to distil something of what, during the years we have been friends, I myself have learnt about Iain's chosen theme for today. I offer this in part autobiographical address to you today, Iain, in gratitude for what we have shared and as a small token in inadequate substitution for all I would like to have been able to share had we been colleagues for longer than those Birmingham years.

Reflecting on 'Faith in the Third Millennium: Reading Scriptures Together', my thoughts converged on four intensities.

An Academic Intensity: Scholarship, Hermeneutics and Theology

The first, an academic intensity, is connected especially with a five-year period during that time in Birmingham University. At the suggestion of our mutual friend and colleague, Frances Young, she and I co-authored a book called 'Meaning and Truth in Second Corinthians'. It brought five years of intermittent but intensive conversation, study, translating and writing, together with a Master's course and a discussion group of colleagues also focussed on this short, dense letter. What were the lessons from all this for reading together – besides the happy and by no means unimportant confirmation that study and friendship can so richly enhance each other?

The first was *how crucial and generative the activity of translating is*. We had both been trained in Greek and Latin classics, which meant that both of us were dissatisfied with all the available translations; but I do not think either of us had tried collaborative translation before. Franz Rosenzweig said that you know a text for the first time in translation. (And there is a sense in which our most important relationships, whether between friends, disciplines, traditions, religions, or

generations, are exercises in translation.) Wrestling together with Paul's knotty, concentrated Greek not only led into all dimensions of philological scholarship; it also threw up one historical, literary, hermeneutical and theological issue after another. I remember the feeling of sheer inadequacy when faced with Chapters 8 and 9 about the collection for the poor in Jerusalem. Nils Dahl said these chapters are 'impossible to translate'.¹ Paul is using one key term of his Gospel after another in order to speak simultaneously about actual finances and the 'economy of God'.² The metaphorical and the literal are complexly interconnected, and this embodies linguistically 'the coinherence of the financial and divine economies [a matter, Iain, that you may want to reflect upon as you head this well-endowed – though, I am sure, in the opinion of the Trustees, never sufficiently well-endowed – institution]: in 2 Corinthians the mutuality of spiralling giving and thanksgiving culminates in the ultimate value, the glory of God (8.19; 9.13).'³ 'Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift' (9.13). Again and again the labour of translating difficult passages led us on into questions for which scholarship – whether philological, historical, sociological or literary – was not sufficient, but neither was hermeneutics alone nor theology alone.

This was the second lesson, *the necessary coinherence of approaches to a text such as this*, which generally means that interpretation must be collaborative, a conversation between readers steeped in differing disciplines and their habits of inquiry. This in turn calls for practices of long-term collegiality that are rare enough in the academy. Appropriate academic intensity requires forms of sociality that pose a little-recognized challenge to our institutional creativity. How can we create settings

¹ N.A.Dahl, *Studies in Paul* (Augsburg, Minneapolis 1977) p.31.

² 'The collection itself is called *charis* (grace, gift of grace, favour, benevolence, gracious work, 8.6,7,19; cf. 8.1,9; 9.14; 1 Cor. 16.3), *koinonia* (partnership, sharing, fellowship, 8.4; 9.13; cf. Rom. 15.26), *diakonia* (ministration, service, relief work, 8.4; 9.12,13; cf. 8.19,20 (the verb *diakonein*), and Rom.15.21), *eulogia* (open-handedness, blessing, liberality, willing gift, 9.5; cf. 9.6), *leitourgia* (service, voluntary public service, priestly religious service, 9.12; cf. Rom. 15.27), *haplotes* (single-minded commitment, simplicity, generosity, 8.2; 9.11,13), *hadrotes* (large sum of money, plenitude, liberal gift, 8.20), *perisseuma* (overflow, abundance, 8.14), *endeixis tes agapes humon* (proof of your love, demonstration of your love, 8.24), *sporos* (seed-corn, seed, resources, 9.10; cf. 9.6) and *ta genemata tes dikaiosunes humon* (the offshoots, harvest or yield of your righteousness, 9.10; cf. Hosea 10.12). Even this limited focus shows the collection linked into key terms in Paul's Gospel and 2 Corinthians. The ordinary word for collection, *logeria* (1 Cor. 16.1,2), is not used at all here. The chapters are certainly about money and basic attitudes to possessions and prosperity, but these are inseparable from the character and glory of God, the practice of faith and love in the church and the dynamic reality of grace. The metaphorical application of economic terms to the gospel is given a new development, as key gospel concepts, including economic ones, are in turn directed at reconceiving financial attitudes and relationships.' Frances Young and David Ford, *Meaning and Truth in 2 Corinthians* (SPCK, London 1987; Westminster, Philadelphia 1988) pp. 176f..

³ Ibid. p. 180.

and encourage relationships that enable the best practice of such disciplined reading together?

A third lesson has taken longer to draw. It came clear last year when thinking about another co-authored book, called *Thinking Biblically. Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies* by Andre LaCocque, an Old Testament scholar, and Paul Ricoeur, among many other things a hermeneutical philosopher. (I think Paul Ricoeur, with Karl Barth, is among the very greatest Christian minds of the twentieth century – two thinkers of the Reformed Protestant tradition who are also deeply complementary to each other, and converge, one through philosophy and the other through theology, on the utter centrality of biblical interpretation.) LaCocque and Ricoeur draw together the more retrospective, archaeological approach of LaCocque with the more prospective approach of Ricoeur, who engages with the text's reception through the centuries and with its meaning for today. Thinking about the traditions and disciplines of interpretation which they bring to bear on texts from Genesis, Exodus, the Psalms, the Song of Songs and other books, it is as if they are attempting to recapitulate the most fruitful exegetical and hermeneutical practices of the Western academy since the foundation of universities alongside the monastic schools of Medieval Europe. There is, especially in Ricoeur's rich and daring exposition of the Song of Songs, something of the monastic *lectio divina*, a meditative, contemplative reading allowing for many senses, and oriented above all towards the worship of God. That monastic tradition often resisted the scholastic, argumentative discourse of the new universities and their concern with Aristotle and other philosophers, but Ricoeur shows how to learn from the scholastics too as he discusses the 'Ego sum qui sum', 'I am who I am', of Exodus 3.14. As the Middle Ages turned into the Renaissance and early modernity, scholasticism was in its turn challenged by the humanists. The Christian humanists' return to sources, their emphasis on Greek and Hebrew, and their appreciation of poetry, rhetoric and history are all reflected in the studies of LaCocque and Ricoeur. And in later modernity we might discern the strands most obviously represented by the two authors: the strongly *wissenschaftlich* German philological and historical critical tradition, and that of philosophical and theological hermeneutics.

The lesson I draw from this is that *we read scripture together not only with those in the various disciplines of the academy but also with our predecessors in the communion of saints*; and these include monastic saints, scholastic saints, humanist saints, hermeneutical saints and (even!) saints who are historical critics. It would be

surprising if each of the regimes of reading that have at various times dominated the academy did not have something to teach us (even when practised by those we might not identify as within the communion of saints at all), and this encourages us to welcome representatives of all of them (the religious and the secular, and those who are complexly both) into the circle of those with whom we read and discuss scripture.

An Ecclesial Intensity: Wisdom Interpretation for the Church in the World

I now turn from the academic intensity of scholarship, hermeneutics and theology to a second, which I am naming *an ecclesial intensity*, one centred in the church in the world. This has many aspects – local, regional, political, ecumenical and more – but for now I will confine myself to one formative involvement of my own over another five-year period.

The 1998 Lambeth Conference for the 800 bishops of the Anglican Communion took Second Corinthians as its theme text, studied together by the whole conference in small groups every day in the context of morning prayer. I was part of a group that organised the opening and closing plenary sessions with a focus on the Bible through drama, video, discussion and addresses. This later led into my participation, as leader of the Bible studies and theological adviser, in four annual meetings, between 2000 and 2003, of the Archbishops and Presiding Bishops of the Anglican Communion, called Primates' Meetings.

As is well known, during all this time the Communion was engaged in vigorous argument, especially over issues relating to homosexuality; and these in turn were inseparable from deep differences over the interpretation of scripture. This has been one of the most public and long-running disputes in our time over how to read scripture together. I need not remind you that this is not just an Anglican problem: the issues here resonate around the world in many Christian Churches and in other religious and non-religious communities. So although I am selecting the tradition that I know best, there are analogous tensions in other churches and traditions.

Within the Anglican Communion the culmination of the most recent phase was the publication of the Windsor Report by the Lambeth Commission on

Communion set up by the Archbishop of Canterbury, which is now in the process of reception and was discussed last month by the Primates' Meeting.⁴

What is to be learnt regarding reading scripture together from this Anglican experience between Lambeth 1998 and this year?

One encouraging result is that it shows it can be done fruitfully; the discouraging thing is how easily this achievement can, at least in the short term, be undermined, ignored or undone, especially through the activities of well-financed and well-organised interest groups skilled in dealing with the media. The 1998 Lambeth Conference sub-group that spent over two weeks considering human sexuality was made up of over fifty bishops, ranging from Bishop Jack Spong to conservative Nigerians. They began extremely polarised but ended by agreeing a common statement that was no empty compromise.⁵ Yet this sub-group report was brushed aside by the highly politicised plenary session that discussed sexuality. In successive Primates' Meetings something similar happened. In each one that I attended, a common life interweaving worship, the study of scripture, serious listening to each other in a spirit of mutual accountability, the sharing of issues from each province, and engaging with a wide range of demanding questions, from canon law and

⁴ Appropriately for our theme today, its discussion of scripture is under the heading of 'The Bonds of Communion'. What it says about the authority and interpretation of scripture in the Church is as good as any brief statement I have read. Its finely balanced affirmation of authority says:

'If the notion of scriptural authority is itself to be rooted in scripture, and to be consonant with the central truths confessed by Christians from the earliest days, it must be seen that the purpose of scripture is not simply to supply true information, nor just to prescribe in matters of belief and conduct, nor merely to act as a court of appeal, but to be part of the dynamic life of the Spirit through which God the Father is making the victory which was won by Jesus' death and resurrection operative within the world and in and through human beings.' *The Lambeth Commission on Communion: The Windsor Report* (Anglican Communion Office, London 2004) p.39.

This recognition of an authority that is part of the dynamic of the Spirit involved with all the contingencies and complexities of history and community life, and open to fresh interpretations, leads it to recognise the current situation as, against the odds, an opportunity for the Bible even to become a means of unity:

'If our present difficulties lead us to read and learn together from scripture in new ways, they will not have been without profit... In fact, our shared reading of scripture across boundaries of culture, region and tradition ought to be the central feature of our common life, guiding us together into an appropriately rich and diverse unity by leading us forward from entrenched positions into fresh appreciation of the riches of the gospel as articulated in the scriptures.' (*Ibid.* p.42)

⁵ The ingredients, as observed by a member of the plenary group that I was part of, Dr Tim Jenkins, a social anthropologist, included shared worship, small group Bible study, thorough preparation by resource people, a commitment to respectful conversation, a really able secretariat of three bishops (who produced a draft proposal each day, circulated it, registered and coped with criticisms and disagreements, and redrafted it overnight), all enabling a process of coming to a common mind. This process was one in which no one was expected to give up a convinced position (especially on the way scripture was to be understood) and so bishops had to allow a certain discretion and integrity to each other, while at the same time they took into account and took responsibility for the effects of their own position on other participants and dioceses, offering to each other an imaginative understanding and compassion.

theological education to HIV/AIDS and world poverty, led to unanimous joint statements. Yet surrounding each meeting, and sometimes penetrating the meeting places, were the dedicated lobbyists pressing hard for quick, decisive and inevitably divisive solutions according to their own clear criteria. And in between meetings the political pressures were sustained, encouraged by some of the Primates, often exerted through the mass media, but also through creating single-issue solidarity across continents.

But it is worth trying to name the sort of scriptural interpretation that went on in that sub-group at Lambeth, in the Primates' Meetings at their best, and probably (though here I do not speak as an eyewitness) in the Commission that produced the Windsor Report. How might we describe this interpretation?

It is *centred in worship*, the primary locus for reading scripture together. It grows out of *intensive, respectful conversation* in community, conversation around both scripture and the issues of church and world. It is alert to the *varied modes of interpretation* in the tradition and in the contemporary church and academy and it appreciates the abundance of meaning in Scripture. It is *imaginative and compassionate* in understanding and assessing the interpretations of others. It recognizes the *immersion in messy history* both of the biblical characters and authors and of the whole intricate and conflictual tradition of interpretation, including ourselves.⁶ It *resists the temptation to reach for the security and satisfaction of clear, decisive answers* to questions in dispute among faithful Christians, and the consequent temptation always to speak emphatically in the indicative and imperative moods, when it might be more appropriate to use the interrogative mood, or the exploratory subjunctive mood of 'may be' and 'might be', or the optative mood, the 'if only' of desire to see face to face in the future while acknowledging that now we see through a glass darkly. It is willing, on the one hand, to enter into *dispute for the sake of God's truth and love*, allowing that challenge, disagreement and admonition can be life-

⁶ Part of sensitivity to history is exploring why a particular issue regarding scripture has become so 'hot' at a particular time. What are the conditions for it becoming the focus of attention? In whose interest is it that this be at the centre of attention? Should this centrality be affirmed or challenged? If its importance is granted, is it so important as to be church-dividing?

One example worth reflecting upon is that of predestination to salvation and damnation. This has been deeply divisive, especially among Protestants, and has split churches, local communities and families. There is a great deal of scripture relevant to it and no single interpretation has been generally agreed. Why at some periods has it been 'hot' enough to divide the church whereas at others, without being resolved, it has not been central? Are there lessons to be learnt from the ways in which this issue has at times been taken off the boil and enabled not to be church-dividing even while also not having been given a clear, decisive answer?

giving in any good family life, but, on the other hand, it is also willing to *live patiently with deep problems*, if necessary for many years, rather than break up a family bound together by the blood of Christ. Finally, it trusts that, if the two great commandments are about love, and God is love, then ***no interpretation is to be trusted that goes against love*** - that is Augustine's great *regula caritatis*, the rule of love. *If love is the rule, then the 'how' of reading scripture together is as important as the 'what'*. To come to conclusions in a separate group about what the Bible means and then to try to impose these on others by polemical websites, worldly political strategies, and a good deal of caricature, selective quotation and anger, is deeply unchristian. But to follow an ethic of holy communication in love, to apply to our reading together the maxims, for example, of the letter to the Ephesians (that great epistle of unity, much of whose ethical teaching concerns the use of language):

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Ephesians 4.29-5.2)

- that is to be committed to long-term patience with each other, often to give up chances of political advantage, and therefore to be politically vulnerable.

I suggest that one possible name for all this is: ***a wisdom interpretation of scripture***. Wisdom in a full biblical sense somehow catches the blend of understanding, sensitivity to historical circumstances and to persons, concern for human flourishing, and passion for God and God's purposes that are in line with the wisdom and love through which all things were made. And it allows for the arts as well as the sciences, for depths beneath depths, for complexity that resists any overview, even for paradoxes, unresolved difficulties, unclarity and the mystery of God. Just think of Job!

And thinking of Job immediately sets this wisdom in the context of the most terrible anguish, the cries of those who suffer, who seek against all the odds to make sense of things. Wisdom in the Bible is closely related to cries: the cries of wisdom

herself, the cries for wisdom, for justice, for forgiveness, for peace, for prosperity, for healing, for life, for God; and the cries of God. I remember the effect at the Primates' Meeting in Kanuga in 2001 of the Revd Gideon Byamugisha, someone with HIV/AIDS who gripped the whole gathering with his account of the AIDS pandemic, its implications, and what might be done about it. Really hearing this cry put the Church's internal difficulties into another perspective and directed attention to scripture in a different way. As we interpret scripture in order to work out our salvation in a fear and trembling before God (Philippians 2.12) that we hope is the beginning of wisdom, *are we within earshot of the cries of our world that go up to God?*

Above all, *are we within earshot of the cries of Jesus Christ from the cross, and of Paul's proclamation of 'Christ crucified...the wisdom of God'?* (1 Cor. 1.23-4) In my judgement, the most significant event of the meetings during those five years centred on the cross. It happened in Porto, Portugal in 2000 in the course of a Bible study on the Letter to the Ephesians. A discussion of 'the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name' (Eph. 3.14) led into a discussion between two African archbishops about authority in families. This connected with the discussion of Ephesians Chapter 2 about being brought together by the blood of Christ, 'For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us' (Eph. 2.14). *The core realisation was that if it is virtually unthinkable to turn away and break off from our natural families, how much more unthinkable and scandalous should it be to turn away from those with whom the blood of Christ unites us?* The measure of suffering to which we are called for the sake of our unity is nothing less than that seen in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. This led into a statement in the Meeting's communiqué that seems to me to give a prophetic wisdom for Christians in our new millennium:

As in any family, the assurance of love allows boldness of speech. We are conscious that we all stand together at the foot of the cross of Jesus Christ, so we know that to turn away from each other is to turn away from the cross.

And that statement is quoted in the final sentence of the recent Windsor Report.

One final lesson from those five years. During them there was a growing realisation that, if time were to be given to the Anglican Communion to continue together, one area above all would need to be addressed: theological education. It had

become clear that theological education was actually deteriorating in many regions, and that many clergy, let alone laity, were not being formed in ways of prayer, worship, scriptural understanding, and engagement with the world in the best traditions available. The pivotal issue was the interpretation of scripture. In the aftermath of one standard Book of Common Prayer it was apparent that the common language of the Communion has to be shaped afresh by the Bible, but that it has not anything like a common mind about the ways in which the Bible should be studied, interpreted, taught and lived. This is a core challenge to be met if there is to be a healthy Anglican Communion; *I have become increasingly convinced that here in the reading of scripture together there is also a core challenge for Christianity as a whole.*

An Interfaith Intensity: Jews, Christians and Muslims Reading our Scriptures Together

Now to the third intensity, which is closely related to the academic and the ecclesial. Of recent publications that manage to describe and embody wisdom in interpretation I think the best and most accessible is the publication of The Scripture Project sponsored by the Center of Theological Inquiry here in Princeton, with participation from this Seminary by William Stacy Johnson, edited by Ellen Davis and Richard Hays and called *The Art of Reading Scripture*.⁷ They summarise their joint conclusions in nine theses on the interpretation of scripture, distillations of their wisdom which are as good guidelines as any yet offered for reading scripture together in the twenty-first century.⁸ The eighth of the nine theses reads: ‘Christians need to read the Bible in dialogue with diverse others outside the church’.⁹

⁷ Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2003.

⁸ The nine theses are as follows:

1. Scripture truthfully tells the story of God’s action of creating, judging, and saving the world.
2. Scripture is rightly understood in light of the church’s rule of faith as a coherent dramatic narrative.
3. Faithful interpretation of scripture requires an engagement with the entire narrative: the New Testament cannot be rightly understood apart from the Old, nor can the Old be rightly understood apart from the New.
4. Texts of Scripture do not have a single meaning limited to the intent of the original author. In accord with Jewish and Christian traditions, we affirm that Scripture has multiple complex senses given by God, the author of the whole drama.
5. The four canonical Gospels narrate the truth about Jesus.
6. Faithful interpretation of Scripture invites and presupposes participation in the community brought into being by God’s redemptive action – the Church.
7. The saints of the church provide guidance in how to interpret and perform scripture.
8. Christians need to read the Bible in dialogue with diverse others outside the church.

The third intensity is the engagement of a community of Jews, Christians and Muslims in what is called Scriptural Reasoning. Its origins are in a Jewish group called Textual Reasoning that began to meet at the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in the early 1990s, with Professor Peter Ochs as one of its founding members. They are Jewish text scholars (of scripture and Talmud), philosophers and theologians who found that there was little deep engagement between their different discourses, centred on texts and reasoning, and so they started to study together. Some Christians, myself among them, used to sit in on their argumentative, learned and extraordinarily lively sessions. Soon we joined together to form a second group of Jews and Christians, Scriptural Reasoning, studying the Tanakh and the Bible; and a few years later were joined by Muslims with the Qur'an. Scriptural Reasoning is now, like Textual Reasoning, a unit with a life of its own in the programme of the annual meeting of the AAR, there are groups in various parts of the world, an international Scriptural Reasoning Theory Group that has been meeting twice a year at AAR and in Cambridge, a grassroots body called the Children of Abraham Institute (CHAI), the online *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning*, a research group focussing on medieval scriptural interpretation in Judaism, Islam and Christianity that is convened here at the Center of Theological Inquiry, postgraduate programmes in the University of Virginia, and much else.

The core identities of Judaism, Christianity and Islam have always been inseparable from their scriptures and accompanying traditions of study, interpretation, argument, doctrine, ethics and worship; and this is unlikely to change in the third millennium. *It makes deep sense for these rich and widely influential reading traditions to engage as thoroughly as possible with each other.* They are already complexly related in content, and also with regard to issues of transmission, translation, normativity, methods of interpretation, contemporary relevance, and so on. Both historically and in many parts of the world today communities that look to these scriptures have lived and are living together, often with considerable tensions. But whereas both the academic and the ecclesial intensities of scripture reading are served by many forms of collegiality, the interfaith intensity has almost a complete

9. We live in the tension between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’ of the Kingdom of God; consequently, Scripture calls the church to ongoing discernment, to continually fresh rereadings of the text in the light of the Holy Spirit’s ongoing work in the world.

- Ibid. pp.1-5.

⁹ *The Art of Reading Scripture* op. cit. p.4.

lack of collegiality. Where in our world do Muslims, Jews and Christians gather to read our scriptures together in mutual hospitality and attentiveness? *I believe that a crucial challenge for faith in the third millennium is to create new forms of collegiality gathered around our scriptures and their accompanying traditions of interpretation and application.*

The practice of Scriptural Reasoning is to spend some time in plenary discussion but most time in small groups studying passages of the three scriptures that in some way relate to each other. We have focussed on texts concerning revelation, law, economics, teaching and learning, prayer, love and much else. Last month a group in Cambridge was joined by Rowan Williams the Archbishop of Canterbury for a two-hour session on Joseph and Potiphar's wife in the Qur'an and Tanakh, and, from the New Testament, the woman who anointed Jesus' feet. Hebrew, Arabic and Greek flew around the room; the Hadith, the Talmud and patristic and medieval interpretations were drawn in; and all sorts of contemporary issues raised. In the phrase coined by Dr Aref Nayef, each of us brings to the table our 'internal library'. When all these libraries are resourcing the reading of three texts at the same time, the result can be a dazzling intensity that combines the premodern, modern and postmodern, that can produce startling surprises, that defies overview, systematising or adequate reproduction in print, but yet - for those of us with academic vocations – has an intrinsic impulsion towards a theorising, a doing of philosophy and theology, and a writing that can never do anything like full justice to what is going on but still tries to approximate to it as well as possible.

What happens at best in such sessions is close engagement with each other's texts in a spirit simultaneously of academic study, of being true to one's own convictions and community, and of truth-seeking and peace-seeking conversation wherever that might lead. It does not usually lead to consensus – the differences between us often emerge more sharply, and at these points there is often a deepening awareness of the meaning of one's own faith. It does often lead to friendship. *The mutual hospitality of each being both host and guest in relation to the others is at the heart of this collegiality.* Each tradition needs to offer its best food, drink and cuisine.

For me that means preparing and offering those academic and ecclesial intensities in coinherence. In particular, that involves striving to embody and communicate something of what I have tried to describe through my account of the best practices of interpretation in the Anglican Communion in recent years. All of the

strands in that wisdom interpretation cry out to be worked through appropriately in Abrahamic, interfaith reading of scripture: the intensive, respectful conversation in community, focussed on both scripture and the issues of church and world; the abundance of meaning in scripture and the consequently varied modes of interpretation in the academy, in the tradition and in the contemporary church, synagogue and mosque; the value of imagination and compassion in understanding and assessing each others' interpretations; recognition of immersion in messy history; the need to resist the temptation to reach for the security and satisfaction of clear, decisive answers to questions in dispute among Jews, Christians and Muslims, and to value mutual questioning and exploration; the willingness, on the one hand, to enter into dispute for the sake of God's truth and love, and, on the other hand, to recognise the strength of our bonds in the family of Abraham and the call to live patiently with our deep differences; and throughout to conduct our reading according to an ethics, and even politics, of justice, love and forgiveness.

Yet, as in the Anglican Communion, so in each of the Abrahamic faiths: such practices of wise reading are extremely vulnerable. The politics of scriptural interpretation can be crude, manipulative, and literally violent. I do not think that Scriptural Reasoning, or any other peace-loving practices among Jews, Christians and Muslims, can flourish without building up of forms of dedicated collegiality and collaboration that are prepared to meet strong opposition within each community and in the secular world. Our world needs such signs of hope, and it needs the resources for peacemaking that each of these traditions can offer. And among these resources is one that is incomparable.

God, The Ultimate Intensity

This is *the fourth intensity: God*. In recapitulating the lessons learned from recent Anglican experience I omitted the first: reading needs to be centred in worship as its primary location. This points to the most obvious (yet extremely easy to ignore) truth about Muslim, Christian and Jewish scriptures: that they are above all concerned with God. Within each tradition, doing justice to this is a never-ending challenge. Between them it is even more difficult and sensitive. For most members of each tradition, including myself, worship together by Muslims, Christians and Jews is not appropriate. But if, as people who pray, we enter into joint scripture study together, perhaps this is as near as we can or should come to sharing in the intensity of worship

that is at the heart of synagogue, church and mosque. Around the Scriptural Reasoning table are people who acknowledge that *this reading is done before the living God*, however differently we might identify God.¹⁰ Reading in the presence of the God of Abraham, the God of peace who wills to bless all peoples through Abraham: that is the ultimate source of encouragement and hope for such reading together.

And there is a consequent lesson for our reading, one which I believe goes to the heart of each of our traditions, and which, if we learn it well and follow through its endless implications, will guide us into the richest scriptural wisdom of all. The lesson is that each of us, both within our own traditions and when we come together, should ***read our scriptures for God's sake***. We are to read for the sake of God and God's purposes. This is the ultimate orientation of reading among Jews, Christians and Muslims. Of course our reading can have worthy penultimate motivations and aims, but the ultimate desire is to hallow the name of God, to bless, praise and thank God, to acknowledge that God is great, good, compassionate, forgiving, holy, and has whatever other perfections are expressed in worship, to relate to God all that we are and think and hope and do, and to read and live in ways that please God.

Epilogue: On Friendship

Finally, a word one of God's purposes, friendship. I remember a distinguished graduate of this Seminary, Dr Preman Niles, saying to me that in his view the success of the first decades of the Christian ecumenical movement was to a considerable extent due to friendships that were formed across Protestant and Catholic boundaries and were strong enough to endure severe pressures. Much more than friendship is, of course, required if a major movement is to flourish long term; but, without friendships at the heart of it, it is unlikely that its fruitfulness will have the right quality and depth. And might it be that relations between faiths have in our century something of the

¹⁰ This is not to imply that Scriptural Reasoning must be confined to practising Jews, Christians and Muslims. Within universities, for example, it can be appropriate to have scholarly readers of scriptures who are not necessarily members of one of the three traditions: they might be members of other religious traditions or not identify with any. This creates a different dynamic than when all are Jews, Christians and Muslims, but one that is especially relevant to the complexities of our religious and secular world. My view is that within universities there should ideally be both types of groups; but in practice, given the complexity of the religious identity of many people today in both religious and secular contexts, together with the related complex interplay of religious and secular dimensions in communities labelled either 'religious' or 'secular', actual groups are likely to have very different make-ups and often be extremely hard to categorise. Such complexifying of boundaries is intrinsic to any worthwhile, transformative interfaith practice in a religious and secular world.

same urgency and sense of *kairos* that the Christian ecumenical movement had in the mid-twentieth century, and that they will both flourish in this millennium only if they are engaged in simultaneously?

For me, this occasion today is a deeply moving feast of friendship. Iain Torrance, whose friendship I share with my collaborator in scriptural interpretation, Frances Young, has invited me to celebrate with him and many of his friends (and, no doubt, some who will in the future be friends), and to deliver this address not only alongside two of my friends from among those who do Scriptural Reasoning, Peter Ochs and Aref Nayed, but also alongside one of Iain's other friends, Setri Nyomi, whom it has been a great honour and delight to meet here for the first time. *It may be in such exchanges and extensions of friendship among readers of Tanakh, Bible and Qur'an that the clearest signs of hope for faith in the third millennium are to be found and, hopefully, multiplied.*