

SHORT WRITINGS FROM TAIZÉ
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Brother François

It Is the Word
That Is the Bread
of Silence

Word and silence are two realities which condition one another. When there are too many words, we withdraw in search of silence. But once we are in silence, we sense how daunting it can be. A child knows that; when no one is addressing it a single word, it is sometimes filled with panic, having the impression that it is no longer alive, is suffocating.

“It is the word that is the bread of silence,” as Paul Hoppe (a Swiss writer who died in 2006) wrote. It is the word that allows one to persevere in silence. One word is enough to make silence bearable, and can at times fill it completely.

When we want to read the Bible for ourselves, we withdraw into silence. But the silence must not remain empty; it has to enable us to have access to a substance capable of filling it.

A personal reading of the Bible presents us with four questions: why choose the Bible? What really is this Bible? How can we let ourselves be touched by the Word it contains? And how are we to bring that Word into ourselves?

Of course, the two words “Bible” and “Word” are not the same. We need the Word, for it is capable of nourishing us. But that Word comes to us as part of a vast whole, the Scriptures. That is the form in which it has crystallized out for us.

That whole is certainly too vast for us to explore fully. Where are we going to find what we are looking for, the living Word? Perhaps it will be best to do as we might when visiting an exhibition devoted to a painter. We pass to and fro in front of the pictures, letting them become familiar without being completely caught up by any of them yet. Then suddenly, at a given point, the beauty of a particular picture strikes us, and we remain in front of it for a long time. We come back to it again and again, maybe, and from then on the other pictures begin to mean more and more to us as well. The painter, too, becomes accessible to us, to such a degree that we see the reality around us in a new way, through the artist’s eyes.

We can approach the Bible just as we ap-

proach that kind of exhibition. First, we try to grow familiar with it, until one particular portion of text strikes us; after that others, too, reveal themselves. Finally, the Author speaks to us. The Author has opened his heart and we realize that he is addressing another heart, our own. That is the beginning of a dialogue destined to go on into eternity.

Why the Bible?

All the great religious traditions have their sacred books, to which they are intensely devoted. For Christians, the Bible has always held a unique place.

Still, some might ask whether they have not been conditioned. Are there not other books that might help us more, books introducing a certain spirituality or helping us gain some deeper psychological discernment, works that are closer to our daily life, or more sophisticated from a human point of view? Surely some more recent forms of religious writing would be more accessible than the Bible, which has come down from such a remote past and from a culture so different to our own? Some people even ask if the sacred writings of other religions are not more sublime, less rough-hewn. Why

be so attached to the Bible? What is so special, so unique about it?

As a reply, I would like to turn the question back to the person asking it. At what level do you situate your life? It is obvious that, in life, there is a lot to be acquired: knowledge, skills, everything necessary for a better life. But when it is a question of love, of selflessness, of faithfulness, or when decisions are required that will determine our basic orientation, each person calls upon whatever is deepest within, the heart. At that point the trust that we wish to give – faith – intervenes. Is it not at this level that the Bible offers something unique?

The struggle that marks us most deeply is the struggle of faith. Nothing leaves us more exposed than the fact of having given our trust to another, to God, to Christ. No one can live that trust fully without having to pass through times of testing. Jesus himself alludes to that when he teaches us to ask “do not let us enter into temptation”: when a trial risks making us lose faith keep us from entering into it, for there are situations in which we no longer know what to hold on to.

When it is a matter of the struggle of faith, what other book could possibly re-invigorate our hearts and give strength to our floundering footsteps? The Bible speaks, as nothing else does, of what lies in the most intimate depths of God. It shows what desire within God drives him to seek for a communion with us humans, and just how

far that desire is prepared to go. It tells us what a price we have in God’s eyes, what paths God has had to take in order to join us where we are. It makes us aware of how deeply God is in solidarity with us when misfortunes strike. And what is infinitely deep within God’s heart is found to be at the same time infinitely broad. These things concern every human being without exception. In order to retain our courage, nothing is more necessary than to keep hearing that same truth over and over again.

All its imperfections cannot rob this book of its unique character, cannot compromise its authority. It is true that there are many things the Bible does not explain. It leaves them in God, respecting God’s mystery. As for what remains to be discovered in the course of history, it has confidence in human wisdom. But what disturbs us more than anything is to find in the Bible stories or obligations that veil the true face of God, the face with which, in the end, God has made himself known to us. We need then to tell ourselves that a book which it took more than a thousand years to compose can only be read in the perspective that best corresponds to it. It is not a book of piety, but tells the story of how God reveals himself with perseverance and how his people gradually comes to know him better. We have to enter into that perspective, focusing entirely on God’s desire to reveal himself to us, then entering into God’s plan to establish with

us the closest possible communion. It is in this sense that the Bible resolutely places our existence on the level of faith.

Four approaches to the Bible

Before trying to answer the question “What is the Bible?” I would like to bring together four different approaches to reading it. First, a phrase from Saint John of the Cross, “The Father has spoken only a single word, his Son; now in an eternal silence he never ceases to speak it; it is up to us to listen to it in silence.”

Saint John of the Cross seems to be ignoring the multiplicity of words contained in the Bible. According to him, all the words transmitted in the name of God in the Old Testament did not as yet express what God really was longing to say. In order to say that God’s being itself is love, more than speeches were needed. It had to be proven in human flesh by following the logic of love through to the end, by a total and irrevocable gift. Therein lies the incomparable Word, a proof than can never be surpassed.

Before that Word a silence stamped with anguish reigned, for the dramas of human existence still remained without any real answer. After that essential Word the silence continues, but it has a

completely different character. There will never be any other affirmations having the same weight. So we should be careful not to cover over that ultimate Word by considerations that are tilted too strongly in our direction. Such a Word can only be received in silence.

The second epistle of Saint Peter does not talk of silence or words, but instead uses an image going in the same direction: “You are right to keep your eyes fixed on this word, like a lamp shining in a dark place; (keep looking at it) until day begins to break and the day-star rises in your hearts” (2 Peter 1:19).

The realism of this text is striking. We are in an utterly dark place. Darkness surrounds us. Only a tiny lamp offers us light. We gaze at it while our waiting continues.

We need to note the expression: looking at the Word. When the Word is taken as a whole in this way, it becomes light. Being light, it demands above all that our eyes remain fixed on it. Silently. Once the day has dawned, we shall realize that through that gaze faithfully focused on the Word, Christ, the morning star, has risen in our hearts.

A third witness I want to quote stresses especially the link between the Scriptures and faith. “They are capable,” writes St Paul to one of his closest collaborators, “of granting you the wisdom that leads to salvation by faith in Jesus Christ” (2 Timothy 3:15).

If it is true that the Scriptures give us knowl-

edge of that unique salvation achieved in Christ and that is opened to us by faith, they do so by giving us a taste for it. The word “wisdom” expresses more than “knowledge,” suggesting as it does a way of knowing based on experience. The Scriptures allow us to “savour” salvation.

We must not be bewildered if there are many places in them where a “No” is spoken against human projects, desires, weaknesses and illusions. Such a “no” is directed against the pretensions and illusions that are incapable of leading to salvation, but at the same time they open up a path leading to the quality proper to salvation of being a free, undeserved gift. By giving us a taste for God’s unexpected generosity, the Bible teaches us not to love anything that does not have that savour.

The theme of taste serves to introduce a fourth possible approach. The German Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig, who died in 1929, offered a definition of the difference between reading the Bible and reading any other kind of book. We can learn what is in the other books, he said, by reading them. “When it comes to the Bible, two things are necessary to learn what is there; we have to listen to what it says, and also be attentive to the beating of the human heart. The Bible and the heart say the same thing.”

Why that insistence on the beating of the human heart? It is certainly true that an abstract and purely intellectual approach often misses the point

of the biblical texts, and can even lead to complete misunderstanding. The way the Bible describes the love of God, God’s faithfulness, the passion, struggles and supplications of that love, cannot be understood without experiencing those realities for oneself. The language of the Bible remains powerless unless we appeal to all the resources of the human heart. Here is a book that can only be grasped by a heart capable of vibrating at what can be glimpsed in it of the Heart of God.

What is the Bible?

Such a question might require a reply in terms of doctrine but in the present context I am asking it from the point of view of someone trying to read the Bible personally. What can the Bible mean to such a person? What can he or she find in it?

First and foremost, I would say, the unique and indispensable witness with regard to Christ. Without the Bible, what would we know of Jesus? What would we know of his life, his death and resurrection, if we did not have the Gospels? And who would enable us to understand all that follows from his paschal mystery, if the apostles had not left us their writings? At the same time, Jesus’ own faith, his human roots would remain

incomprehensible without the great foundational texts of the Old Testament. We have no other access to the truth of Jesus apart from the Scriptures.

In this precise sense, the Bible can be termed “inspired.” It guarantees the true knowledge of Christ. Of course, it is possible to seek another kind of truth about Jesus behind the biblical texts, saying that their authors were influenced by the culture of their times, by certain prejudices, or were trying to improve on reality. Some might wish to give more credit to apocryphal gospels or prefer some so-called “scientific” hypotheses in order to construct a more accessible image of Jesus, one closer to what we would like. But it remains a fact that, for anyone wishing to risk their life following Jesus, only the Bible has the power required to set them going. Its witness offers what has been found valid and truly tested.

In saying that, I am not turning Christianity into a religion of the Book. Our faith is always attached to the living Christ. It is he that our faith listens to and wishes to follow. It is he, as Risen Lord, who has authority over our lives. But by written witness he makes himself present to us. Without that witness, we remain at the level of interpretations that are all relative and ineffective. Nothing will ever replace this book.

Still, it is not enough to present the Bible as the irreplaceable witness concerning Christ.

For it situates that witness within a long dialogue, a dialogue between God and his people. The witness is not sent down from above. It was prepared by a dialogue and takes the form of a dialogue.

In order for his Son to be born amongst us, God had to prepare the world by a very specific history, one limited in fact to a single people. That will always be a great mystery to us. The seed of divine life could only be sown in the heart of humanity after a long furrow had been ploughed in the earth, dug deep through many failures and heartbreaks. No idyll could ever have prepared our hearts so that they were ready to receive Christ, for the relation of God with humanity is not set at that key. So we will have to accept the stages of that dialogue, the imperfections. For through that long dialogue the true face of God is revealed. Christ himself knew that his entire mission would have to be inscribed within the extreme limits of that one way.

The witness given by the Bible and the dialogue which it chronicles are located in the past, but those do not end with the prophets, the evangelist and the apostles. They continue, though without possessing the same authority. We do not add further books to the Bible. Our role is different. The witness of the Bible has to be confirmed by our own. Otherwise it has no effect. The Bible only has authority if the Church attests by its whole life that the witness it offers

is true – so true that the witnesses are prepared to give their lives for it. If the Bible is reduced to being a document from the past, a dead book whose meaning can only be uncovered after sophisticated explications, then questions arise. It can still speak to our present age if we commit ourselves to becoming that “letter from Christ” of which Saint Paul writes that it is “written by the Spirit of the living God on tablets of flesh, our hearts” (2 Corinthians 3:3).

Today, nobody denies that the main difficulty in reading the Bible comes from its origins in a remote past and a culture that developed over several millennia. Until perhaps the mid-20th century, Europeans venerated things that were old; the incredibly rapid development of technology has led to a radical change in people’s perceptions of the past. What is old is now seen as old-fashioned, out-of-date, ill-adapted, useless. In that case, how can we keep the Bible as a reference?

It is not only technology that stresses distance in time. The secularized civilization in which we live robs us of all the references we would need in order to understand biblical notions, even those as central as redemption, holiness, repentance, new life. Stock phrases or intellectual ploys are not enough to solve this difficulty. What is required is a new language, and that new language requires a re-founding in the crucible of our lives. Even with the very little that we understand, we make the Bible audible, readable,

even visible, when our very lives become a letter from Christ. Writing in prison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer sensed very strongly the difficulty we are faced with. He knew that we did not yet possess that new language. The only thing we can do, he says, is “to pray and to do what is right... then God’s time will come.”

How can we allow ourselves to be touched by the Word?

It is quite possible to read the Bible simply in order to learn more or to seek to be confirmed in faith. That is quite valid. Still, a personal reading of the Bible aims to do more. It brings us into a dialogue, a dialogue that will call upon our heart and which is therefore going to leave us exposed.

A personal reading of the Bible exposes us because in it we are trying to welcome consciously the word of Another. Instead of remaining with what habitually comes up within us, we strive to hear a voice that does not come from ourselves, one which challenges us and draws us out of what encloses or isolates us, a voice with an opinion about us differing from what we think of ourselves. Will we be able to let that voice call us into question, tell us things that we have

failed to see, reveal to us things we are hiding from ourselves?

This Otherness of the Word! For this is a word that is not on the same level as the discourses we hear all around us; it is also not to be confused with our habitual ideas. It may be that the Word of God presents itself in a poorer manner. It may even seem less interesting. But what distinguishes it in a fundamental way is the source from which it comes. For it bears witness to the mystery which is at the origin of all and which sustains all, that love we could never have conceived of on our own.

In this sense, the Word has a unique authority over us, not an authority that imposes itself arbitrarily without taking account of what we are, but that one true authority which makes us be and grow. All who welcome this Word venture to expose themselves to its otherness, and therefore make the space in their lives that it needs if it is to be heard. They get rid of everything that might clutter that space. They want that Word to remain their partner in dialogue for a whole lifetime, and therefore they accustom themselves to silence.

Insisting in this way on the otherness of the Word does not at all mean keeping it outside ourselves. Origen, one of the first Church Fathers, stressed strongly that the Word coming to me corresponds at the same time to what is waiting within me. If the Scriptures can be com-

pared to a well, a spring of water, “it is also true that each of our souls is a well of living water.” “The present working of Christ as Word of God involves removing the earth from each of our souls, setting free the wellspring within it.” So if the Word needs to come to us from without in order to remove the debris obstructing the living water, it is yet not a stranger to us. It sets free within us what God has already placed there. He who speaks in the Word will also speak in our inner depths.

It takes a lot of simplicity to let ourselves be touched by the Word. The progress of the Church across the centuries has very often depended on men and women who have put their faith in the Word and put it into practice without hesitating. Even if they have only grasped very little, that little was for them so obvious and so urgent that they felt bound to practice it. The author of Psalm 119 says clearly that I am not to hide behind the competence of others with more experience, those he calls “masters” (v. 99). I must dare to expose myself, “put my soul in my hands” (v. 109) for now it is God himself who wishes to “instruct” me (v. 102). I must therefore “hasten and not delay to practice what I have understood” (v. 60).

A certain degree of solitude is bound to be involved in this kind of simplicity. I am obliged to accept that solitude before the Word because it challenges me personally. I especially need to

accept it at moments when it provokes a sense of unease in me. For quite often the Word brings us to a threshold: how am I to pass from what seems humanly impossible to what may be possible with God? Am I tempted to take refuge in theoretical considerations or hide behind what other people say, or am I prepared to be alone with the Word? It appeals to my inmost being and aims at something that no one else can do for me.

In days gone by, tradition sometimes enveloped the Word rather too much, robbing it of its explosive power. Today, a similar danger sometimes comes from the great development of exegetical studies that are likewise capable of setting up a screen, leaving us paralyzed by too much information, too many checks and analyses. Still, it must be said that both tradition and exegetical studies can be a powerful help as we confront the Word. Tradition (especially the oldest parts of it) helps by its extreme concern not to keep the Word at a distance but to apply it in the here and now; exegetical studies help because, by stressing the situations in which each text arose, they enable us to sense parallels with our present-day situations.

The solitude demanded by a personal reading of the Bible must be understood aright. While I try to let myself be touched by the Word, I cannot monopolize it and make it say what suits me. It does not belong to me. It is “other” and that otherness is something I must respect to the

very end. The Word belongs to the One who spoke it and that One entrusted it to a communion, a fellowship of believers of all ages and all places. Even in my solitude, the Word comes to me as a result of an obedience that has come down through the centuries. The reading I undertake is one I share with the whole Church, with all those “saints” who lived by it so intensely. If I forgot that, I might fall into an illusion about myself, and in so doing move away from a true putting-into-practice. Opening myself to the Word implies that I respect it as something that is never my own personal property.

How can we bring the Word into ourselves?

God comes to us in His Word. The encounter with God does not begin with what arises within ourselves, feelings which are more or less precise. Even the search for inner emptiness is not the first step. God addresses us in an intelligible manner in order to receive from us a conscious, free response. At the same time, the Word that comes to us is set on becoming an inner word. It is not simply an announcement or a commandment. It is capable of bringing us back to life

(John 1:12; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23). And that rebirth, that process of becoming, is something it can effect anew each day,

What then are we to do so that that Word can truly become ours? In a quite famous text, the Carthusian Guigues II distinguishes between four stages: reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation. Basing himself on the text of Matthew 7:7, he stresses that while reading seeks, meditation finds; while prayer asks, contemplation savours. He says: “Reading brings a kind of solid food to the mouth, meditation chews and munches it, prayer discovers its full savour, and contemplation is the total sweetness which delights and restores. Reading is in the outer shell, meditation in the inner kernel, prayer in the solicitations of desire and contemplation in the happiness of the sweetness received.”

The Word offers itself as a food. It has to be “eaten” slowly if we are to draw from it all the nourishing substance it contains. We ruminate it (“chew it over”) at length, for that is the way in which it becomes digestible, capable of penetrating us. It is given, in fact, to become one body with us, to enter our bloodstream and shed there the energy and heat proper to it. The comparison with food shows clearly that the assimilation of the Word is not something that is merely done intellectually. It involves the whole of our being, body and soul.

Before embarking on the first of the steps indi-

cated by Guigues II, we need to remind ourselves that welcoming the Word assumes an attitude of listening as the most fundamental thing. Knowing from whom it comes, I surrender myself to the Word. I cannot be satisfied with a merely external silence. It is deep within me that there has to be a receptivity, a wakefulness, an openness.

The Servant in Isaiah describes that in the following terms: “Every morning God wakens my ear so that I listen as a disciple. The Lord God has opened my ear” (Isaiah 50:4-5). The ear may remain asleep, so it has to be wakened, pulled out of its drowsiness, and that needs to be repeated every morning. It may easily be found shut, so God has to open it, unblock it, “dig it out” as another text says (Psalm 40:7). Then I stand there like a “disciple,” like someone who does not claim to know everything already, who turns in expectant waiting toward the will of the Master.

With God I have to listen in somewhat the same way as when I listen to another person. I am not content simply to register formally what is being said. I listen to what lies beneath the words that are spoken, in order to sense what the person is unable to express. My eyes and my heart are involved in my listening. With God, too, I try to sense how the Word is being addressed to me, to hear the sound of His voice. I strive to discern the features of a face. Listening is never something passive. An open ear remains constantly alert. “Let those who have ears hear!”

In reading, another requirement arises in addition to the attention needed in listening. When we are confronted with a written text, the one addressing us is not there to correct what we have misunderstood or to stress what we have missed. We have to do that for ourselves. A greater concentration is therefore necessary. We have to insist on that to ourselves.

Reading, then, requires a special effort of attention, weighing the words, observing the details, imagining the situation, questioning the text on its intentions; instead of pulling the text toward myself, it means going out toward it, respecting it as it stands; bringing all our senses to bear, “seeing” what is at stake in a text, repeating for oneself the gestures mentioned, touching, feeling.

After reading comes the meditation in the full sense of the term. While there may be a variety of methods corresponding to different human personalities, there must be something that is essential to any kind of meditation. The Word is not only like food; it can also be compared to a seed. The seed has to die and sink into the ground in order to spread its substance and bring forth fruit (John 12:24) but it also needs to find good, generous soil, capable of providing it with the proper substance to nourish it (Luke 8:15). Substance is mentioned twice, that of the Word that has to descend into us and that of the welcoming soil (the heart) that needs to offer the best of itself.

Guigues II said that “meditation is in the inner kernel.” It seeks out the substance of the Word. As we do with a nut, we have to shell the biblical word and expose what is edible. Or to use another image, we press it as we would a lemon in order to benefit from every drop of the juice it contains. The substance of the Word is always what comes from the Heart of God. That is what we have to look for. And we must not stop until we have found it. For, as Guigues reminds us, “meditation finds.”

But our own substance also has to enter into the work of meditation. For the Word needs all that we are in order to bear fruit within us. The soil of our hearts must not be an unwelcoming ground nor a thin surface layer. All the energies at the heart’s disposal are required if the seed, as it dies, is to find what is needed to produce a plant and fruit. The goal, after all, is for the Word to become so completely our own that we no longer need to remember it, but it works within us “on its own” (Mark 4:28), almost without our realizing it.

It is possible to bring a text down into our heart by memorizing it and so giving the words increasing resonance and colour. This or that portion can also be focused on, turning it this way and that and so finally introducing oneself into the text as if one had been one of the actors. It is equally possible to distinguish the most striking aspects and go more deeply into them over a longer period, asking questions

and interrogating oneself. The main thing is to recognize that one is each time being challenged by the text as if it were saying, “Here, this is about you.”

In this way, meditation becomes prayer, the kind of prayer that knocks at the door so that “the Heart of God opens within the words of God” as St. Gregory the Great put it. A prayer that commits our whole being to keeping nothing back from the influence of the Word. Above all, a prayer that transforms the Word given into a dialogue using “you” when it is a matter of God or Christ and “I” when it is a matter of human beings. A difficult verse such as John 17:19 becomes much more existential when I derive this prayer from it: “You sanctified yourself for me, Jesus, in order that I too might be sanctified; you gave yourself without reserve to the Father and in this gift of yourself you give me a way of giving myself in turn, something I would otherwise be incapable of.”

Very sensitively, Guigues II remarks of such a prayer that, if meditation is in the kernel, “prayer is in the solicitations of desire.” For when the Word of God becomes prayer, it awakens desires, gives birth to intuitions. Turning a text into a dialogue makes it that much closer, but also at the same time allows it to draw us onward. Anyone who prays becomes open to the Spirit and the Spirit gives life (2 Corinthians 3:6). The Spirit has the

power to make a text desirable, realizable, to bring it to life.

Listening then gradually becomes a way of looking, a contemplation. The inevitable questions, such as “how?” or “how far?” lose their acuteness. The Word received establishes a silence. It is up to God to give what he orders. Our role is to leave God the room to accomplish it. Once God has given us an understanding of what he was expecting of us, he will likewise bring it to pass step by step. We have simply to follow God’s way of doing things, without trying to get ahead of him, but rather to sense how God goes on ahead of us, prepares us to remain in harmony with his will.

Biblical contemplation does not involve some kind of ascent toward timeless truths, but rather abandoning ourselves to the plan of God. Our gaze looks ahead, eager to follow the intentions of his loving will for humanity, intentions that have to be accomplished here on earth and throughout history. Then, while remaining involved with body and soul, we no longer feel that we have to be on top of things and events. The greatness of the love of God has taught us to give him plenty of room and not to intervene before the time is ripe. It is God’s plan that has to be accomplished as he intends it. Our looking then becomes a waiting, a “contemplative waiting” as Brother Roger used to say.

Our reception of the Word attains its goal in this faith-filled looking. By touching us deeply

enough, the Word will have placed our whole existence on that level so that we can advance in believing, bearing within us the happiness faith brings.

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