Lamp to My Feet, Light to My Path:
The message of Benedict XVI to the youth of the world on the importance of living with Scripture

The letter’s occasion and plan

The occasion for this papal letter is the 21st World Youth Day, which is being celebrated this year on Palm Sunday. While last year’s celebration took place in Cologne, this year’s celebration (and apparently next year’s as well) is to take place in local churches. In July 2008, the site for the World Youth Day celebration will be Sydney. The overall theme for these three years is the Holy Spirit and mission. For 2006, the Pope’s reflection focuses on the Spirit of truth who reveals Christ to each of us, particularly through the devout reading of Scripture. Next year, the Pope’s letter will reflect on John 13:34 where Jesus says, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” And in 2008 he will ask us to turn our attention to Christian mission and to ponder the text: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The Pope explains the reason for this three-year plan of reflection and celebration: “There is an urgent need for the emergence of a new generation of apostles anchored firmly in the word of Christ, capable of responding to the challenges of our times and prepared to spread the Gospel far and wide.”
The Bible as the Church’s book

Scripture, the Holy Father writes, drawing on Psalm 119:105, is the “lamp” and “light” by which we make our way through the world. He says, “The loving presence of God, through his word, is the lamp that dispels the darkness of fear and lights up the path even when times are most difficult.”

But Scripture is the Church’s book; apart from the community of believers, Scripture would have no life. We read and meditate upon the Bible from within the Church, and from within the Church the Holy Spirit teaches us as we read, think, and pray. Love for Scripture and love for the Church should grow apace. The Pope reminds us that Scripture is one of the two “breads” that nourish the Church, since the people of God are fed both by word and by sacrament. His concern in this letter, however, is Scripture. “My dear young friends,” he writes, “I urge you to become familiar with the Bible, and to have it at hand so that it can be your compass pointing out the road to follow. By reading it you will learn to know Christ.”

Reading the world through God’s eyes

But merely letting our eyes fall on the pages of the Bible is not enough. To read Scripture in a way that lets us hear God speaking to us requires, first and foremost, an attentive ear. The heart, the Pope explains, must be trained to listen. And for this training he recommends lectio divina, the contemplative reading of biblical texts. Reading a passage from the Bible is followed by thinking and reflecting (meditatio). This leads to conversing with God (oratio) and finally to an abiding mindfulness of the presence of God (contemplatio). The study of Scripture needs always to be accompanied by a mindfulness of the presence of Christ.
At this point we may want to elaborate on what the Pope says, since there are multiple presences of the risen Jesus. We speak of his presence in the biblical word, yet we can also speak of the presence of Christ in the believing community, in the Eucharist, in other men and women, especially the poor, in the Church’s ministers, in families and Christian marriages, in the many “Galilees” where human beings live, and even in the graced aspects of human culture. Contemplative awareness should extend to the presence of Christ in all these places.

It is important to notice a serious undercurrent that runs through the letter. Thus we read: “It is not easy to recognize and find authentic happiness in this world in which we live, where people are often held captive by the current ways of thinking.” The human race is stumbling and groping in darkness, the Pope reminds us, searching for a freedom that remains unattainable apart from the Word of Truth which is Christ. The one who meditates regularly on the words of Scripture will discover the difference between “God’s way of thinking” and the way human beings think. In other words, the Holy Spirit helps us to understand the fundamental difference between the way of life and the way of death that is so memorably spelled out in Deuteronomy 30:15-20.

Although the Pope does not go into detail about these two different ways of thinking, a moment’s reflection might bring to mind the sharp contrast within the gospels between what Jesus represents and what Caesar represents. One might think of the difference between the imperial way of power, ambition, patronage, honor, influence, wealth, and military might, and the altogether different way of the Son of God. “God’s way of thinking” (or what we might call “true divinity”) is revealed in poverty, powerlessness, humility, service, solidarity, being
disesteemed by social and religious elites, compassion, forgiveness, and love. Through the meditative reading of Scripture, we deepen our understanding of these two vastly different sets of categories. We learn how to discern the signs of the times and “to read the events of history through [God’s] eyes.”

Of course, we ought not to contrast “God” and “world” so sharply that we lose sight of the fact that God created the world, and continues to create it, out of love. The gospel reveals not only God’s judgment about “the way of Caesar” and the empty values of the imperial style (what the Pope refers to as “the errors or illusions of aberrant ideologies”). But the gospel also reveals God’s redeeming love. It reveals God’s reaching into history, inviting and calling people, especially young people, to be messengers of God’s truth and life. Echoing John Paul II, Benedict XVI urges the youth of the world, “Do not be afraid to respond to him with generosity . . . Do not be afraid.” Within the world there are, after all, many elements of goodness and hope, of which the world’s youth are a pre-eminent sign.

**Morning star rising**

The contemplative reading of Scripture should yield extraordinary results, the Pope assures us, both in terms of what we do and the kind of people we become. He cites the letter of James, “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers” (James 1:22). The practice of meditating on Scripture eventually reshapes everything we do, so that our actions increasingly draw their form and energy from the word of God. But the Holy Father also appeals to 2 Peter 1:19. This verse reads: “So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”
The message of which this text speaks is what the writer once heard “on the holy mountain” when the heavenly voice spoke, “This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” The event he is talking about was, of course, the transfiguration. In that scene, Jesus’ clothes became “dazzling white” (Mark 9:3). Luke writes that “the appearance of his face changed” (Luke 9:29), and Matthew says that “his face shone like the sun” (Matt 17:2). How did such a change happen?

The clue is perhaps to be found in the story of Moses. For we read in Exodus 33:17-23 the wonderful story of Moses’ asking God for the favor of beholding the divine face. The favor was denied, but God compensated by letting Moses see his back. The result was that Moses’ own face became so bright that the Israelites were afraid to look at him and asked him to cover it (Exodus 34:29-35).

In the transfiguration story, Jesus “shone like the sun” and his clothes became brilliantly white because he was constantly looking into the face of God. The eyes of his heart were fixed on his Father, and on “the holy mountain” that deep communion erupted into full view. Nevertheless, the moment of glory passed, for human beings are not meant to spend their lives on mountain tops. They must live and find God in the everyday world. Thus when the disciples looked around “they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus” (Mark 9:8)—the everyday, flesh-and-blood Jesus, the carpenter turned rabbi, whom they had come to know and love. And yet in that instant the three disciples had glimpsed the mystery that lies at the heart of contemplation. Contemplating the face of God brings about an extraordinary transformation. Knowing this, the Pope has invited the youth of the world to read and meditate upon Scripture. For in contemplating the divine Word, the eye of
their hearts will fasten on the face of Christ. And they will, in time, become what they contemplate.

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