Course Understanding God´s Word, 2011 Egypt - part 2
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1. Introduction: thinking about ´meaning´, ´context´ and ´communication´

1.1. Interpretation and understanding are part of a process of communication.

1.2. To be able to understand and explain the Holy Word of God, we need the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. We cannot read the Bible without the ´epiclesis´ (praying for the help of the Holy Spirit). At the same time we have to follow basic rules. We discern 3 ´partners´ in the process of reading and understanding the Biblical text: *1. The text itself; 2. The historical context, including the author of the text; 3. The reader of the text.*

2. Three levels of understanding Scripture:

1. The *natural* meaning – Scripture as it presents itself to us in its basic facts. We can ask questions like: Who? What? When? How? Etc.
2. The *original* meaning – Scripture as it presents itself meaningful for the original hearers or readers. We can ask questions like ´Why is it here?´; ´What was the significance for the people at that time?´; ´What did the author mean by it?´
3. The *actual* meaning – Scripture as it presents God´s message to us in our circumstances. We can ask questions like: ´What does the Holy Spirit say through this text to us today?´; ´How can God´s Word become actual and lively in our existence?´

2.1. The Biblical text and its natural meaning

Natural meaning does not always mean: literal meaning. Language can be metaphorical or poetic. Nevertheless the Bible is *simple* (and not complex of mysterious) in its language. The Bible is written in human language, using: words, grammar. At the same time the Bible authors use different literary styles such as poetic, prosaic or narrative texts. A Biblical text is situated in a literal context.

à Reflection-1 Let us think about the text Hiob 5:

´Blessed is the man whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty, For He wounds, but He also binds up; He injures, but his hands also heal. ´

- What do these words say to you immediately?
- Be aware of the literal context: who is speaking here? What does the book of Hiob say about this person? (cf. Hiob 42:7-17).
- Does this knowledge change your understanding of the text?

à Reflection-2 Let us think about Matth 7: 24-27.

- Try to summarize the meaning of this parable.

- Look to the literal context (Matth. 5-7)

- Does it bring a change in understanding this parable from its context?

2.2. The Biblical text and its original meaning.
To understand well, we have to acknowledge the circumstances in which the text was written or used originally. God´s eternal Word has been written (and before that *transmitted orally)* in a certain historical context, that defines partly the meaning of a certain text. Cf: the difference between the first part of the book of Isaiah (chapter 1-39) and the second part (from chapter 40). In some cases a Biblical book has its own history of development. We believe that this historical process is guided by the Holy Spirit. Cf the Book of Psalms which is clearly composed of smaller book.

à Reflection-1

- What do you see the main meaning of Genesis 1 (the creation of heaven and earth)?

- If you consider that the books of Moses were read during the captivity in Babylon (some theologians pretend that the books of Moses got their final composition in that period), does it add to the understanding of Genesis 1?

- Does it influence the application of the text in our life/context?

It is not easy to find the original meaning. We cannot consult the author. Sometimes the author and the historical context cannot be known. Sometimes a variety of authors have shaped the final text. But we are also helped by interpreters of the past (like commentaries, sermons of the fathers of the church etc.) and by interpreters who are our contemporaries. The church is given to us to help to understand and apply God´s truth, and we must receive the teaching of the church humbly *and* attentively. (cf. Acts. 8:31; Acts 17:11).

2.3. The Biblical text and its actual meaning
The point here is not simply *´how can we apply God´s word?´*, but: *´how shall God´s word fulfil and transform our life?´* We must *eat* it, *digest* it, *absorb* it. Cf. Jer. 15:16; Ezekiel 3: 1-4; John 6:35; Rev. 10: 9-11. St Augustine compares the words of the Bible with the Eucharistic bread and wine.

à Reflection

- Read the first 5 verses of Psalm 139. Make some notes of thoughts and feelings.

- Try to remember in which situations you have read, heard or sung this psalm. Why does this text call forward thoughts and feelings connected to your life story?

- Try to read it again. Look to structure and literal context. Try to detect what the author meant meaning of the author.

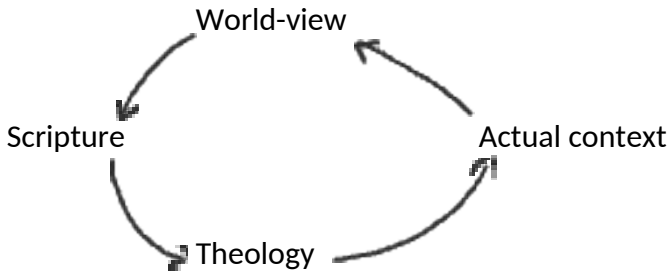
- Formulate anew the significance of this psalm for you (deepened understanding of the actual meaning).

3. Applying the three levels of reading and understanding the Bible.
We use a separate working sheet to practice it through reading *Psalm 1*

4. The reversal in reading the Bible

When we read and explain the Bible, we seem to be the actors, but if we become real listeners, actually *the Bible becomes the Actor*. As soon as we come with our questions to the Word of God, it begins to reshape our questions and brings new, sharper questions to us. We are not explaining the Bible any longer, but the Bible starts explaining us. We don´t grasp the Word any longer, but the Word grasps us.

The so called hermeneutic circle (after René Padilla):



à Reflection

- Let us think about one important and controversial issue in Christian life or Christian church (e.g. position of women, gender issues or music style). How can we bring back the problem to one main question?

- What passages in the Bible relate most to this issue?

- Can we ask this Bible passage about our question and does the Bible throw any light on it from this passage?

- Do we have to reshape or redefine our question? From actual relevance to Biblical relevance!

- When we come back to the passage, does the Bible *question us* about this issue?

- Do we see a deeper, more Biblical and more relevant approach to the issue?

Niek Tramper, June 2011