

Meditation

First of all, may I say how sorry I am that I am not able to be here with you. However, pastoral responsibilities must always take precedence, so I send you my apologies from the other side of the world – or at least at this precise moment, from the other end of the Mediterranean, somewhere over the Middle East.

We have just heard two readings from the Holy Scriptures which speak of the Book, meaning, of course, that collection of scrolls which constituted for the Hebrews the record of God's dealings with his People. For them, this collection was – and is – the Book, the Book, 'ο βιβλος, the unique and sacred depository that defined their very being. In both of these passages, the hearers listen to the reading of the Book avidly, as to something of the greatest significance for them personally. It was some time before the βιβλος became βιβλοι, a plural form no longer revered or guarded as a sacred object but first of all an object of private possession, and then in our own days, something readily available to all but often devoid of any virtue or purpose – one has only to glance at airport bookshops to see that phenomenon.

Yet the concept of books, of that written transmission of culture, patrimony or learning, still retains some of its power, and we know personally of its force. I still remember the excitement, as a boy, that I experienced when my aunt, who had a bookshop, would allow me *carte blanche* on birthdays and at Christmas; and I remember school or municipal librarians who were more than *fonctionnaires* and who shared their knowledge and enthusiasm with an inquisitive and persistent 12 year old. The books did much more than entertain me – they opened new vistas and allowed me to glimpse other worlds beyond my primary one. I never saw books as inanimate objects *per se* but as personal recommendations of inexplicable but real value. Perhaps that is still what I seek whenever I go to a place of books – be it a private or a public library – a personal engagement that is multi-dimensional.

None of us, I think, are in any doubt about the power of books – anyone who has seen François Truffaut's film *Fahrenheit 451* will understand that, as will any student of history, be it of the Inquisition or of the Germany of the 1930's. The fear of books, but

worse, the fear of their destruction, is evident; and the desperate cry of the English poet after the Second World War still rings in our ears

*Get it by heart, by heart;
I have seen books burning*

Yet perhaps a more insidious danger exists, a danger that is two-fold: the conclusion that says, on the one hand, that books are for an élite, and on the other that anyone who can put pen to paper should go to print. The result of the latter is a waste of trees.

What is there to help librarians combat this, be they librarians, as you are, skilled in particular disciplines or areas, or those dealing with the more general public of a region or municipality?

The Christian vision has perhaps something of virtue to say to us here. When, for many of the Hebrew people, the βιβλος had ceased to be the record of the personal love of God for his People; when it has become an arid tabulation of laws and regulations; when it had acquired an almost superstitious power over minds, the Son of God became incarnate, and in him we see the love of the God made visible. The early theologians described this as the Incarnation of the Word of God. No longer was the Word of God simply words written on parchment, no longer was his communication to us inanimate, but something alive and active, the love of God translated into our language. As Saint John was to put it in his first letter:

*Something which has existed since the beginning,
which we have heard,
which we have seen with our own eyes,
which we have watched and touched with our own hands,
the Word who is life - this is our subject.*

You too deal with words that bring life – though in a different way – but it is equally a sacred vocation, and like all vocations we respond to it, not for our own sake, nor for our own convenience, but because it has been entrusted to us, not for our own benefit but for that of our people. The contemporary playwright, Alan Bennett, caught this at the close of his more than successful play still showing in London: *Pass it on, boys*, says the old teacher, *pass it on, that's sometimes all you can do - not for me, not for you, but for someone, somewhere, one day - pass it on.*

In the Name of God, Amen

Kenneth Letts, Archdeacon of France, Nice, September 2010