In 2019 Pope Francis dedicated this Sunday, the 3rd Sunday of ordinary time, as the Sunday of the Word of God. He hoped that it would become an occasion for us to reflect on and deepen our love and understanding of the Bible, something that we clearly cannot do in a single day. It takes time and effort and involves our mind as well as our heart.

I am teaching a course at St Michael’s College this semester entitled “Scripture in Christian Tradition.” In one semester we can only touch the surface, both of the Bible and of the way in which it has been handed down, understood, and made fruitful in the church and in the spiritual life of its members.

One of the challenges we encounter almost immediately when we begin to read the Bible is the fact that it was written in and reflects on almost every page times, places, and cultures very different from our own. This can be both challenging and confusing. The Bible does not provide ready made answers for questions that were in no sense the questions with which its different authors were conversant or knew anything about. An obvious example is modern science.

As true as that is, the Bible has a great deal in it that speaks directly to us, things about God and his intentions for humanity and for the world, about human life, about mercy and compassion, goodness and kindness, about the way we should treat one another.

There ae two steps that are ordinarily involved in a serious reading of the Bible. The first has to do with understanding what the author or authors of the various books were trying to say in formulating their message as they did. The second step has to do with discerning what the text might be saying to us, to the issues that confront us today as individuals, as members of the church, and as part of the human family, issues like poverty and homelessness, justice and peace, climate change and the pandemic and all that it has brought in its wake.

Today’s first reading is part of a longer passage which marks a significant moment in the life of the Jewish people. They have returned from exile in Babylon and have rebuilt Jerusalem and its temple and are now gathered to listen to a reading of the book of the Law of Moses, the Torah. The reading marks a new focus for the religious life of the people. From now on, they will become increasingly a people of the book, a people for whom God’s word becomes present in their midst in the form of a written text.

Today’s gospel teaches two key truths in regard to both the Old and the New Testaments. The first few lines of the reading tell us why and how Luke set about writing his Gospel. He himself was not an eye witness of the public life of Jesus but came later to faith in him from a Gentile background.

Luke tells us that a number of accounts of the public like of Jesus and of the beginnings of the church existed and that he examined them all before deciding how he wanted to tell that same story but now in his own way. His Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, of which he is also the author, are dedicated to someone named Theophilus, either an important member of the community or a symbol of the average believer. Luke says that he wants to give an account of the events that have taken place so that Theophilus might “know the truth concerning the things about which he had been instructed.”

The rest of today’s gospel offers a wonderful example of what is called an actualizing of the Scriptures, a bringing what was written in the past into a living relationship with later generations.

Jesus is taking part in a typical synagogue service. Handed the book of the prophet Isaiah, he chooses a text that originally came out of the time of the exile. The prophet is saying that he has been inspired by God to take on a special role in regard to the exiles, especially those who continue to suffer, whether from poverty, blindness, or oppression of one form or another.

The key to the significance of what is happening comes out when Jesus says to those present in the synagogue, “Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” It throws light on the life and mission of Jesus.

It is not difficult to actualize today’s reading from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. In reaction to manifestations of individualism in the Corinthian church, Paul applies to the church a notion that was common in his day of a nation or people forming a body in which everyone had his/her contribution to make to the welfare of the whole. The church, Paul insists, is such a body.

The pandemic has called forth extraordinary examples of love and compassion, courage and commitment on the part of many people beginning with nurses and others involved in health care. At the same time its challenges seem to have provoked a growth in individualism. When Pope Francis recently spoke of vaccination against the COVID virus as a moral obligation, he was basing that on the social nature of human life. We are all called to contribute not only to our own well being but also to that of our family and of the community within which we live. Although Paul is speaking here primarily of the Christian community, what he says applies to the whole human race. We are all members of the one family of God.