The title "Dean Ireland Professorship of the Exegesis of Holy Scripture" is one which might give the impression that exegesis is rather an arcane enterprise properly carried out only in academic institutions. But the texts which are the object of exegetical endeavour for students of religion and history are also the texts which inspire faith and provide guidance for practical living for millions of men, women and children in the contemporary world. Though most of them would not use the term, exegesis is being carried out in a multitude of different ways and for different ends by a huge variety of people. That is to say, the exegesis of Holy Scripture concerns texts which are peculiar in the extent of their contemporary as well as in their historical significance. The interpreter of Holy Scripture will find him or herself engaged in an activity which will need to take cognisance of a wide range of interpretative questions precisely because the object of enquiry is Holy Scripture, the foundation texts of contemporary communities of faith as well as important evidence for ancient religion.

A continuing challenge for the critical exegete is how to match the competing demands of the academy with those of the ordinary reader. One historical example of this tension will serve to bring out several themes which I want to explore in this lecture. The example is an exchange recorded in an unusual collection of testimonies brought together by the Mennonites, a small Anabaptist Church which came into being in the sixteenth century.

In Flanders, in the middle of that same century, a chandler called Jacob was detained for his Anabaptist activities and subsequently questioned by a certain Friar Cornelis in the presence of the recorder and clerk of the local court. During the discussion Jacob quoted the

* Inaugural Lecture as Dean Ireland’s Professor of the Exegesis of Holy Scripture, Oxford University, 11th May 1992.
book of Revelation in support of his views, which provoked a heated response from his interrogator:

"What do you understand about St. John's Apocalypse?" the friar asked the chandler. "At what university did you study? At the loom, I suppose? For I understand that you were nothing but a poor weaver and chandler before you went around preaching and rebaptizing ... I have attended the university of Louvain, and for long studied divinity, and yet I do not understand anything at all about St John's Apocalypse. This is a fact." To which Jacob answered: "Therefore Christ thanked his heavenly Father that he had revealed and made it known to babes and hid it from the wise of this world, as it is written in Matt. 11:25." "Exactly!" the friar replied, "God has revealed it to the weavers at the loom, to the cobbler on the bench, and to bellow-menders, lantern tinkers, scissors grinders, brass makers, thatchers and all sorts of riff-raff, and poor, filthy and lousy beggars. And to us ecclesiastics who have studied from our youth, night and day, God has concealed it".¹

We catch a glimpse here of the heat generated by the exegesis of Holy Scripture in a particular torrid period of church history. What is typical about the dialogue, though disconcerting none the less, is not only the polarisation of the academically trained on the one hand and the amateur interpreter of Scripture on the other, but the implication that the academic endeavour is superfluous. It prompts the question: if Jacob is right in asserting that he and those like him have an insight denied to the wise of this world, has the university anything to contribute to the exegesis of Holy Scripture? In the second half of my lecture I shall try to respond positively to that question. I will suggest that the patterns of biblical exegesis which have emerged in parts of Latin America over the last twenty years offer an example of the way in which the academic endeavour and the practical faith of the non-professional reader can be found fruitfully alongside one another, rather than in a relation of mutual hostility. In particular I shall look at the way in which liberation theologians have sought to articulate a theology on behalf of the poor, and so to 'open their mouths for the dumb', as Proverbs exhorts us to do (cf.31:8), by speaking up for those who cannot speak for themselves. It is my contention that a New Testament exegete has a role to play by contributing his or her expertise to the insights of the academically untrained, particularly to those of the poor and marginalised.

In the first part of this lecture, I want to touch on an area which has been a major concern of mine: the apocalyptic and mystical

¹ In Thieleman J. van Braght, Martyrs Mirror (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1950). I am grateful to Dr. Alan Kreider for drawing my attention to this material.