

## 20150301Lent2Sermon

Today we start exploring in more details a few aspects of Liberal Christianity. Today we will look at the Bible, the scriptures, 'The word of the Lord.'

Last week I said a Liberal Christian would want to be able to explore the bible's poetry without having to take it too literally. I also said that Liberal Christians value the Scriptures as much as anyone because it is the foundation of the faith. It reveals the nature of God and tells the story of salvation. I did add a proviso - Scripture requires critical appraisal. It would be impossible to speak about Christianity in a sermon or even a discussion without frequent references to the Bible. This is because the bible contains all the basics of what Christians believe.

A reminder - The Bible, although usually appearing as a single volume between two covers it is in fact a collection of documents written by different authors over a very long period of time. All Christians understand that it gives an account of the revelation of God through two thousand years of Jewish history, culminating in the New Testament story of Jesus Christ. Why is it important? Because there is scarcely any evidence of the historical Jesus outside the New Testament, so in fact it is a totally indispensable document.

In the world of Christianity some Christians and Christian Churches emphasise the importance of the Bible more than others. In fact, certain groups identifying themselves as being 'bible-believing' Christians. Now, this usually means that they believe the Bible contains God's actual words and intentions given to the individual writers to write down to pass on to future generations.

The very use of the term 'bible-believing' is pejorative. It implies that there are other people claiming to be Christians who don't believe the Bible, or at least don't believe it adequately or in the correct way.

I'm pretty sure that Liberal Christians probably come into that category. But a liberal Christian's faith relies on the Bible just as much as anyone else's. It is interesting to attend one of these bible-believing' churches. They will have a single reading on which the preacher will use in his (and it is usually a male person) sermon. While in the Anglican and Roman Catholic Church at our Eucharist Services we will have three if not four passages of scripture read and the sermon will usually try to tie these passages together. Us, Anglicans are just as much bible-believing as those other churches.

So, yes, the bible is absolutely central to our Christianity, although of one thing there is no doubt, I don't read it in quite the same way as the self-styled 'bible believers', or indeed in the same way as many less extreme, but nevertheless literal-minded Christians. Liberals accept the **authority** of the Bible for themselves and for the Church they belong to and I want to explore and unpack the basis of this **authority**.

God's character is intensely revealed in much of the text of scripture but the words are unequivocally those of the men and women who wrote those texts. God didn't write them, the Angel Gabriel did not recite it to the authors to copy.

The words record the response of people who witnessed the events, particularly the life of Jesus, in which God's action and character was revealed. The revelation is located not primarily in the text but in the events behind it, and in that sense one can say that the Bible is the inspired Word of God.

Much of the text of scripture is revealing but for the Liberal Christian the entire Bible is not revelatory or inspirational. A dull passage of Jewish history, or a bloodthirsty passage from the Psalms, such as psalm 137 which says: 'Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the stones.' This is definitely not inspired. This is definitely not 'the word of the Lord'. And what can be divinely inspired about the lists of Jesus' ancestors in Matthew and Luke (especially since they disagree with each other)? Or St Paul saying that it is shameful for women to speak in church?

Now, I know this attitude will be regarded as heresy by a very large number of people, including some in St Paul's congregation who are used to a very free thinking approach to theology. The problem is that there is a literalist streak in most of us that teases us with the question: if you say you don't believe **all** of the Bible, how can you believe **any** of it to be true? You can't pick and choose: you can't take the bits that suit you and discard the bits that don't, otherwise the Bible would have **no authority**. If, for example, you say that you don't accept the virgin birth -

that Jesus was miraculously conceived, as Matthew and Luke suggest he was - then why should you accept anything else that their gospels tell you?

The revelation in 'Holy Scripture' is located in the broad sweep of the narrative, not in minute detail. We are able to deduce the character of God from the scriptures, get an impression, an overall picture, which we have to view by standing back from the minutiae of the text, just as you stand back from a portrait to see what the artist intends. Mystery is something to be explored, not defined. And that also applies to God. We often speak of God as a mystery, as Cowper's famous hymn puts it, 'God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform', and since God is always considered to be infinitely greater than the human mind can grasp, that mystery will always defy definition.

We also have to recognise that many of the stories of the Bible are symbolic in meaning and not necessarily factual in the modern historical sense. The miracle of Water into Wine is a good example of what I mean. Whatever actually happened at the wedding reception that day in Cana of Galilee is secondary to the Spiritual message that God's glory is visible in Jesus, and that the difference between the new religion he proclaims and the old religion is like the difference between wine and water. Also the story suggests that he turned an extraordinarily large amount of water into wine – six large stone water jars each holding about 100 litres - far more than the guests could have drunk!

Significant that Jesus himself did much of his teaching by telling parables, which were clearly not intended to be taken literally but to make theological points in a figurative way. These are illustrative stories that don't just have just one meaning, but several layers of meaning. There is no correct interpretation, but each parable is intended to provoke the hearers to think for themselves.

No language can be totally literal anyway. We use metaphors all the time and Jesus used metaphors. The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed; faith is like a pearl of great price; the gospel message is corn to be thrown generously on good and stony ground alike.

So what is the status of the Bible for the liberal Christian. The Bible can be said to be the Word of God in the sense that it provides words about God and gives an account of the life of Jesus, the 'Word made flesh', based on the testimony of those who knew him. It is foundational for the Christian faith, but, like all tradition, it requires critical appraisal. This critical appraisal will seek to answer such questions as who wrote the various books and when? What was each writer's aim? How did the historical circumstances of the time influence the particular editorial angle that the writer puts on his account? How do the social and intellectual changes that have occurred in the past two thousand years influence our interpretation of what is written? Questions like these are not radical or new, but have formed the basis for biblical studies in theological colleges and universities for a hundred and fifty years. Every clergy person will have thought about them and the very great majority will have found their Christian understanding enhanced and enriched by doing so. It's rather like discovering that the more you understand the complexities of football or cricket the more you enjoy the game. Or the more you are able to analyse a piece of music, whether classical or pop, the more you are able to appreciate it.

It is important to see that although the Bible is the foundation document for Christian faith, it doesn't give an answer to all possible moral dilemmas or all possible theological questions. It simply addresses the theological and moral issues that cropped up in the life and times it describes. The trouble is we are tempted to find the biblical authority for the particular view we hold and so we take a single verse out of context and try to prove a case from it.

For example, the Book of Leviticus, contains laws that were developed by a nomadic society of the Middle East in the seventh century BC. That doesn't mean that its teachings are wrong, but that at least we should recognise the context they were written in. Let take that famous verse used as the principal biblical evidence against homosexuality. Leviticus 18:22 says that homosexuality is an abomination. Well, Leviticus also says eating shellfish is an abomination. And that anyone with a defect in their sight may not approach the altar of God, so what about people who wear reading glasses? Or since touching the skin of a dead pig makes a person unclean, does this mean I cannot play football?

I've said that we should look at the broad sweep of the narrative, not in minute detail when reading Scriptures. Let me show you what I mean... look at the issue of the status of women. We know that in the culture of Jesus' time women were treated as inferior to men in terms of religion, marriage, and law. Writing to the Ephesians and the Corinthians respectively, St Paul said that the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church and that women should be silent in church. Yet, on the other hand, and in apparent contradiction, he tells the

Galatians that there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, **male and female**; 'for all of you are one in Christ Jesus'. So if we are to see this as being authoritative teaching for Christians, what should our attitude to women be? There is other biblical evidence to be added to this discussion. The Book of Genesis says that humankind was made in the image of God- an idea that has become foundational in the Christian understanding of humanity. We find that Jesus had some very close women followers: Mary, Martha, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Salome are named in the gospels. Some of these were the first witnesses of his resurrection and although they are not given the status of disciples by the gospel writers, they clearly had a role that was as significant in Jesus' ministry. So Jesus seems to have had an attitude to women that was radical for his time and which is well illustrated by two significant events in the gospels. The first is the story of the woman who interrupted an all male supper party to anoint Jesus' feet with expensive ointment and wiped them with her hair. The act was audacious and in the opinion of the other guests scandalous. They said that she was a sinner and how could he allow her to do such an intimate thing. But Jesus replied that she had given him a better welcome than his host, and that because of her great love her sins were forgiven. The second story is of the woman caught in the act of adultery and about to be stoned to death. Her accusers try to trap Jesus by asking what he thinks is the right punishment for her. He replies that the law is right and that whichever of the accusers has no sin should cast the first stone. The consequence is that no one dares make the first move to kill her and he tells her to go and sin no more. So although there are contradictions in the Bible about the status of women, the broad sweep argues for the equality of the sexes and the view that all human beings have dignity in the sight of God.

I'm afraid to say that not many people read the Bible these days. We are watching too much TV, schools no longer begin with a bible reading and a prayer. Sunday has become a day of shopping not attending Sunday School. Cultural and religious plurality in society has led to a state where religion became increasingly private as we tried to honour each others' traditions. In a Confirmation class a year or two ago I asked the candidates, 'Where was Jesus born?' and the question met with a stony silence until one girl ventured timidly, "Jerusalem?" Christmas has lost most of its religious significance in deference to those of other faiths and none.

If someone came to you and said they wanted to become a Christian, how would you direct them? Read the bible? Which books would you recommend? To say, 'Start at the beginning and continue until you reach the end!' is not really a satisfactory answer. Although I cringe to say this, perhaps we need a "Readers' Digest" condensed version of the bible to help seekers? Brian Mountford has chosen some OLD and New Testament which are his favourites. I've made copies of this list and hopefully you will take it to give to others seeking faith in God – and even if you end up reading some of those passages yourself, it would have done you good too. Perhaps you can make a list of favourite bible bits.