

ADDRESS

by

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to the

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of the

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Encountering God through Scripture

1. Why the bible?

The second major matter I want to raise in this address concerns the bible. One of the key findings to emerge from our Natural Church Development Project, now entering its third year, is that we are weakest in the area called ‚Passionate Spirituality.’

Passionate Spirituality is about our experience of God at work in our lives and in the life of the church. Do we have a sense that we actually encounter God? Do we speak about those experiences? In particular, do we encounter God in and through the bible?

Across over 50 parishes, the two NCD questions that emerge with the lowest score time and time again concern the bible:

- The bible is a powerful guide for me in the decisions of everyday life (Q.72); and
- I enjoy reading the bible on my own (Q.84).

At last year's Synod a question was asked about the authority of the bible. In response, I made some comments on the place and authority of the bible from an Anglican perspective, based on the 39 Articles of Religion from the 16th century, on our own national Constitution developed during the early 20th century, and on more recent reflection from the Windsor Report produced at the beginning of the 21st century. Those somewhat hastily compiled thoughts evoked some interest, so I have appended to this address the question and answer from last year.

Those comments made clear that constitutionally this Church affirms the Scriptures „as being the ultimate rule and standard of faith given by inspiration of God and containing all things necessary for salvation.’ (Constitution S2).

But most members of our church don't lie awake at night worrying about church law, canons and the constitution. What most of us wrestle with is how to understand parts of Scripture itself, how to make sense of what we read, and how to hear God's word for our lives. How is the bible to be properly understood and applied? How are we to understand the authority of the bible? How is that authority brought to bear individually and corporately? Do we actually encounter God in the bible, or do we only read about God's encounters with others in a second-hand kind of way?

Some focus groups run as part of the NCD project have shed light on why we score poorly on the bible questions. Frankly, the bible puzzles people. It's not always easy to understand and so how it applies to or guides our daily lives is not clear.

2. Difficulties with Scripture³

Now these felt difficulties are entirely understandable. The fact is any alert and intelligent reader of the bible will come up against real difficulties. Let me identify a few examples.

³ This section is adapted from Christensen, M.J. 1979. C.S. Lewis on Scripture. Word Inc. pp.16-17

There are historical and factual difficulties. For example:

- a. How did Judas die?
 - Matthew tells us that Judas threw down the thirty pieces of silver in the temple and went out and hanged himself (Matthew 27.5); but
 - Acts (1.18) says Judas bought a field with the money then fell headlong, spilling out his intestines.

- b. The genealogies of Jesus in Matthew 1 and Luke 3 don't match.

- c. Who or what was present at the empty tomb?
 - Matthew says an **angel**, descended from heaven, rolled back the stone, **sat on it** and addressed **two** women (Matthew 28.2-5);
 - Mark says **three** women went to the tomb, the stone was already rolled away, a **young man** was **sitting inside the tomb** who addressed all three (Mark 16.1-5);
 - Luke has at least **five women** go to the tomb, the stone is already rolled away and **two men** in dazzling clothes **stood** beside them and addressed them (Luke 24.1-10); and
 - While John (20.1-18) has **two angels sitting** where Jesus had lain and addressing **Mary Magdalene alone**.

There are numerical difficulties. For example:

- a. 2 Samuel (10.18) says David slew the men of **700** Aramean chariots, whereas 1 Chronicles (19.18) a parallel account of the same battle, says David slew the men of **7,000** Aramean chariots.

There are major and minor inconsistencies. For example:

- a. Who commanded King David to take a census of Israel?
 - 2 Samuel (24.1) says it was „the Lord”; and
 - 1 Chronicles (21.1) claims it was „Satan”.

- b. At Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan, who did the voice from heaven address?
- Matthew (3.16) has the voice say “**This** is my Son, the Beloved, with **whom** I am well pleased.”, addressing the bystanders; but
 - Luke (3.22) has the voice saying “**You** are my Son, the Beloved; with **you** I am well pleased.”, addressing Jesus himself.

There are theological and moral difficulties. For example:

- a. Psalm 137: Is the psalmist right in asking God to slay Israel's enemies and to bless those who dash Babylonian babies against the rock?
- b. In Exodus (32.27): Did the Lord really command Moses and the sons of Levi to go through the Israelites' camp killing 3000 of their brothers, friends and neighbours?
- c. How are we to understand the vast distance between 1 Samuel 15 „Go and smite Amalek ... and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass' and Matthew 5 „Love your enemies'?

As I say, these difficulties squarely confront any alert and intelligent reader of the bible. The way we approach Scripture must somehow take into account and deal with these and other questions in a way that makes sense, that is persuasive.

3. Approaching Scripture

How, then, should we approach Scripture? Stories are sometimes told of people shutting their eyes, opening the bible at random and sticking a pin in whichever page turns up. The verse the pin lands on is then supposed to be God's word for that person. Don't bet on it, would be my advice! It could be dangerous, if the story can be believed that someone using this technique landed on Matthew 27.5 „Judas went out and hanged himself,' but not liking that much had a second go and struck Luke 10.37 „Go thou and do likewise'.

This kind of thinking reduces Scripture to a kind of prop in some magical charade. The bible deserves much more respect than that. If we are going to understand and apply the bible in our lives, if we want to receive the wisdom and truth it offers, then we need to appreciate its character and understand it more deeply.

The bible is a collection of writings compiled over centuries. Each document was written at a different time or times in history, by a particular author or authors, with a specific audience in mind and to convey a particular view in the context of particular circumstances and issues of the time. Then some of the documents have been added to or edited over time in the light of changed circumstances and new issues. Those basic facts have implications for the way we approach Scripture.

For a start, we can't expect the bible to deal directly with every question that comes up in our day. We can't look up what the bible says about stem-cell research, for example, or in-vitro fertilisation or coal-seam gas mining. There are questions critical to us that never even dawned on the ancients and so are not directly addressed in Scripture at all.

Secondly, the writings that make up Scripture were compiled over more than 1000 years and different understandings and conclusions are drawn at different times. So there are tensions and even contradictions within the bible itself. A good example is the story in 2 Kings 9-10 of Jehu. Urged on by Elisha the prophet, Jehu rebels against King Joram and massacres the whole extended royal family, dozens and dozens of people and a whole lot of close friends, leaders and priests besides. Jehu is absolutely convinced he is doing the Lord's will: As he drove to the scene of the massacre at Jezreel he shouts „Come with me and see my zeal for the Lord' (2 Kings 10.16). But a century later, another prophet assesses these same events very differently. Hosea (1.4) bitterly condemns the bloodbath at Jezreel and hears the Lord saying that he is going to punish the house of Jehu for it.

Over time, with further reflection, different interpretations of historical events emerge leading to different views of God. This dynamic, with its tensions, incongruities and contradictions, illustrates the gradual, unfolding way in which understandings of God

emerge. In some ways revelation can be seen as progressive. We can trace the way in which earlier and inadequate ideas are replaced by more adequate ones. We've already noted the huge distance that exists between 1 Samuel 15 „Go and smite Amalek ...’ and Matthew 5 „Love your enemies’. But this doesn't automatically mean that „newer is better’ or „more recent is more true’. Nor does it support a simplistic view that Christianity supersedes an outdated Judaism. That isn't true to Scripture itself.

Nevertheless Christians do affirm that Jesus Christ is the fullness of the revelation of God. Shining through the New Testament is the conviction that the Old Testament finds its fulfilment in the incarnation, life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. So Christians read the Old Testament through the lens of faith in Jesus Christ. But that is a very different thing from saying that the Old Testament authors had Jesus in mind when they wrote. They didn't. And we shouldn't imagine Jesus hiding in every Old Testament nook and cranny or think that those authors refer to Jesus directly. At the same time we do affirm that the sweep of biblical history reaches its goal and fulfilment in Christ. It means Jesus Christ is the fullness of the revelation of God, which prior to him was discerned only partially. (Note too though, this is not a claim that we grasp the truth revealed in Jesus Christ fully and completely. That would be to claim too much. What God has revealed in Christ is full and complete, but our grasp of it is not. The Holy Spirit continues to remind us of all that Jesus did and said and to lead us more fully into understanding the implications of that revelation. Christians can't afford to be arrogant about this.)

The historical character of the bible means knowing where a particular passage fits into the biblical story as a whole influences our understanding of it. And as well as different historical settings there are also different cultural, religious and social contexts against which biblical material should be understood.

It's also clear that there are different sorts of literature in Scripture. There is narrative or story, both historical and non-historical; there are proverbs, moral maxims and wisdom sayings; there are legal codes; there is poetry, prophetic writing and liturgical material and there is personal correspondence. When we come to consider the

meaning of a particular passage, the type of literature we're looking at makes a difference to the way we understand it and its significance.

These few observations point us in the right direction when we set out to interpret and understand a particular passage or book in the bible. And so we ask questions like:

- Who wrote this passage? When? In what context? For whom? With what purpose in mind?
- What sort of literature is it? Narrative? Poetry? Law? Liturgy? Historical or non-historical? What place does it have in the book of which it is part? What place does this book have in the sweep of the biblical story?
- What did this passage mean for the people for whom it was originally intended (given their place, time, way of thinking)?
- Through what sort of glasses did those people, at that time, view the world? What assumptions did they make? What did they presuppose? How did those glasses influence the author and the readers? Did those glasses emphasise some elements and leave others out of focus or entirely unexamined?

Once we have as good a grip as we can get on what the passage meant to those for whom it was originally intended, then we can ask:

- How has this passage been understood and applied since that time? Have those understandings been reasonable or have they sometimes been distorted or even mistaken?
- How has the church thought about and applied this passage over time? Has the church always been reasonable? Consistent? Right?

We can then think about what the passage means in our own time and situation, separated by many centuries from those for whom it was originally written. We can ask:

- What must the truth be, if this is how the truth appeared to people who thought and spoke and wrote like that?
- What significance does that truth have for this time and this situation, separated by many centuries from theirs? How is this time and situation similar to then? In what ways is it different?
- What glasses are we wearing as we read the passage and as we look at our own time and situation as well as at theirs? What are our assumptions and presuppositions? How are they similar and how do they differ from the original readers'?

This process of taking what was written in and for one time and context and translating it across centuries of social, religious, historical and philosophical change is no straight-forward matter. It requires and deserves careful thought, conscientious analysis, intelligent assessment and prudent judgment. This is what biblical criticism is all about: taking the bible seriously on its own terms, learning what it had to say originally and how it has been understood over time.

In some circles biblical criticism has a bad name; it's a bit on the nose, regarded as being fancy, academic footwork to get around the bits of Scripture we don't like and to avoid the parts where the shoe pinches. To some minds, biblical criticism is a child of the enlightenment, „the age of reason' of the 17th and 18th centuries, during which faith was sacrificed on the altar of human hubris. Human beings arrogantly set themselves and their own rational abilities over and above the revealed word of God and instead of being judged by and obedient to Scripture, made themselves judges over Scripture.

But the foundations of careful, analytical, critical study of the bible were laid well before 18th century rationalism and the rise of science. As early as the 3rd century,

Origen of Caesarea produced a critical edition of the Old Testament in the midst of considerable debate about the „authorship of various writings, and their relative value, and grappling with contradictions in the Old Testament and divergences among the four Gospels’⁴. These early bible students wrestled with how much of the Old Testament remained authoritative in the light of the New and how the Old Testament was to be understood in the wake of Christian teaching. These same kinds of questions are still alive for us today.

4. Hearing the Word of the Lord

Is this all we can expect, then? Are we doomed to sink in a sea of historical research, literary analysis, academic dispute in an unlikely attempt to get to the original meaning of obscure texts? Is the bible reduced to an object of dry, academic study? Or is there still hope for encounter with the living God through Scripture? Well, I would say „No’ to the first question and „Yes’ to the second. The whole point of informed, disciplined, critical thinking is to draw from Scripture truth and wisdom for living in the present: we engage with Scripture to hear the word of the Lord.

When we speak of Scripture as being inspired, we affirm that God is present and active in and through it. Not that God dictated the words of Scripture to authors that were robots rather than active, thinking human beings. No, both God and human beings were actively involved in the processes that produced Scripture, just as they are today in the processes of reading and hearing Scripture. The Holy Spirit is present and active in the life of the Church and in the lives of individuals today illuminating our hearts and minds as we read, study and reflect on Scripture and its meaning.

Hearing the word of the Lord today requires us to engage with Scripture in a number of different ways. We might think of it as a balanced diet.

⁴ Dodd, C. H. 1946. **The Bible Today**. Cambridge University Press, p.15.

We do need to do some critical study, to have an understanding of what is in the bible, and how to approach it. But dry academic, critical study alone won't be enough. We also need to enter into Scripture prayerfully and reflectively, attentive to the voice of the Holy Spirit in our own lives. We need to listen actively to Scripture as it is read and expounded and applied in Church. If we go to the Sunday eucharist with questions that arise from our daily lives clearly in mind, we will be surprised just how often God does seem to speak to us in the liturgy. Sometimes we expect and anticipate far too little. This balanced diet I am talking about requires discipline and application, critical study and openness, prayerfulness and reflection, solitude and community.

5. A way forward

The NCD project has highlighted some work we need to do in relation to the bible. So I invite you, and through you the members of your parishes and organisations, to commit yourselves to doing just that.

In recent months, at my request, the staff of St Francis College have been developing a one day course that will give thoughtful lay people an overview of the bible. It will provide the kind of background information that will help people make sense of the bible as they engage with it individually, in groups and in church. It will be a helpful refresher for clergy, too.

I invite you to participate in that one day course during the coming year. And I ask that you go back to your parishes and organisations and encourage others to do the course as well. The St Francis staff will put it on all around the diocese, perhaps in each deanery, or wherever numbers require it. My hope is that hundreds and hundreds, if not thousands, of Anglicans will take up that opportunity in the coming year.

Then, in addition to that one day overview, I ask that you choose one other action to engage with Scripture in the coming year.

Here are three options:

- **Option 1** is to get together with some others in your parish or deanery and undertake a small group study of one book of the bible or something similar. You might meet weekly or fortnightly or monthly, whatever suits your situation. It need not and probably won't take all year. But do it sometime in the next twelve months.
- **Option 2** is to commit yourself to praying one of the daily offices, morning or evening prayer, from the prayer book, and reading one of the Scripture passages from the lectionary for that office, along with suitable notes or bible commentary. You will find that your clergy are already doing this and you may choose to join them rather than doing it on your own.
- **Option 3** is to commit yourself to daily reading of a portion of the bible along with bible reading notes produced by the Bible Reading Fellowship or something similar.

Your clergy will be able to assist you in locating what you need and they will be more than happy to point you in the right direction. In fact there is a substantial display of suitable resources at this Synod which I hope you will explore. And there are plenty of people to advise you.

My request is that together as a diocese we seriously lay to heart what the NCD project is telling us and invest some time and energy in addressing this issue we face. Will you undertake yourself the one day bible overview course, and commit yourself to one of the three options I've outlined? And will you go back to your parishes and organisations and cajole, persuade and encourage others to join you in doing the same?

I am sure our church health and congregational vitality along with our own spiritual lives will be much healthier for it.