

How do you read the Bible?

Following Adrian Alker's sermon preached at the Parish Communion on 23rd January a number of the congregation expressed interest in reading it. Adrian has provided a copy.

How do you read the Bible, in what sense is it for you the word of the Lord as we say in our worship? Is the gospel of Matthew to be read as a biography of Jesus? Is it like a biography of, say, Ghandi or Constantine? Is everything in the Bible true? Were there really wise men bearing gifts, arriving at the crib where shepherds were kneeling, above which a star was hovering and angels singing? Did Jesus and his family really escape to Egypt? Did a dove really descend upon the head of Jesus and did the voice of God come over the 'tannoy' as it were? Did Jesus literally spend 40 days in the wilderness having a conversation with the devil? Did he then really take a walk by the lake, recruit some complete strangers who just happened to leave all their work behind?

Well that so far is what you have read in the gospel of Matthew to date. And there is plenty there to fill out our liturgies and our hymns. But is it all true? And is that the questions we should be asking? Many people in the world see the Bible as literally dictated by God and to be taken therefore as literal fact. Doing the internet rounds at the moment is a story from, you guessed, the USA, about a notable biblical scholar named Harold Camping (who?). This 'scholar' has worked out, after a close study of the scriptures, that Jesus will return to 'rapture' his people and deliver the last judgement on May 21st of this year. After 2000 years of delay and rescheduling that day has come! Fortunately Christine and I are managing to get in our holidays and be back just in time for May 21st. So you see there isn't really any need to worry about who your future clergy might be, there ain't going to be a future for most people!

This is just one example of how literal, fundamental religion is fast becoming mainstream in some parts of our world. I don't intend to be frivolous about this. But this kind of literalism is making a mockery of Christianity and switches people off altogether. I cherish the Bible. The Bible is for Christians the foundation story of the person of Jesus who is for us the Word of God incarnate. Without the Bible, in any version, King James or NRSV, we wouldn't know about the life and the teachings and the experience which people had of Jesus of Nazareth. Our task is to distinguish between history and metaphor in the scriptures and to ask the question *what does this passage mean?* Rather than *is this passage true?*

So what do those lovely Christmas stories, parables if you like, mean? What does it mean to be sent out in the wilderness for testing? What does it mean to proclaim the kingdom of God? And what does it mean to follow this Jesus?

Let's remember one central feature of the gospels: they are all later responses trying theologically in a Jewish/Hellenistic world to put into words an explanation of an experience. The experience was of overwhelming love, compassion and acceptance through the person of Jesus. Why else would people leave their jobs and join his cause? People in Lower Galilee at the time of Roman occupation, at a time when the Jewish population yearned for a coming messiah, an agent of God sent to deliver God's people, these same people experienced in Jesus such a sense of wholeness and healing, such a transformation in their lives that they subsequently came to describe the experience as one of feeling that the power and holiness of God was right there in their midst. Even the execution of Jesus by the pagan rulers could not extinguish that abiding power of love. From those experiences of changed lives and a vision for a changed world, emerged the explanations, the reflections about Jesus in the letters

of Paul, the gospels and subsequently the Church. The man of Galilee finally became the Lord of the Church, the second person of the Trinity. The explanations always follow the experiences.

Behind the stories of Christmas, behind the dramatic call of the fishermen disciples, was a human being so full of the divine grace, love and power that this Jesus became the Christ of God. Jesus, at some point in his life, (Mark, our earliest gospel records that it was at his baptism) felt so empowered by the spirit of holiness that he started a movement, gathered around him followers, showed that God had no favourites, neither Jew nor Gentile and began to speak and teach of a kingdom where God reigned.

Until we take Jesus out of the stained glass windows and recapture the Man for Others our religion is in constant danger of being about belief: what we believe **about** Jesus rather than about transformation, how we are changed by the Spirit of God that was in Jesus.

Jesus did not intend to make people more religious; he challenged much of the religion of his day. That's the next chapter of Matthew– the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus did not strive to make people Christian, he lived, worshipped and died a faithful Jew. Jesus did not work to found a Church. He came to speak of a kingdom of God on earth. Jesus was a chosen channel of the Love and Grace of God which can fill out a human life. And the gospels tell us, if we read between the lines, of a life lived out showing that love to all people, sharing table meals with those considered unclean, healing the sons of the pagans, befriending women and children, touching lepers, challenging political and religious authority. This is the Jesus of the gospels and this life of love and compassion was so compelling that it turned ordinary fisherfolk into martyrs and saints.

As a Christian community you are clearly at a crossroads in your history, not only in building terms but in how the churches in Headingley are to witness to the kingdom of God on earth. Whilst this will doubtless entail a lot of talk and thinking about church, your calling and mine is to be the body of Christ, the hands, feet, eyes, mouth and mind of Jesus. I like the prayer at the beginning of your liturgy, asking that we might find new avenues, in ways we have not imagined, of holding the Light of your love to be a revelation for all people. This is surely at the heart of our mission, the heart of God's mission.

The heart of our mission is not about telling people to believe certain things, its not even about filling St Chad's church, wonderful though that would be. And it certainly isn't about telling people that on May 21st Jesus will return to save or to damn you. The heart of the Good News is about sharing in the transforming love of God, revealed in Jesus. That's a tough loving which means working for justice and equality, accepting people who are different, challenging the secular powers – in fact doing what Jesus did.

In theological jargon there used to be something called Hodgson's Question. In the late 1930s a very prolific writer called Leonard Hodgson was elected to the chair of Moral and Pastoral Theology at Oxford. I rather admire Hodgson because he refused the offer of a bishopric. Good on him. One of the things I remember from reading his works was a simple question: "If Jesus did what he did and said what he said in his day, what must we do and say in our day?" It's not at all profound a question, it's not wrapped up in theological clauses or church speak. But it is the basis of what we must do as disciples working for the kingdom of God on earth.

So as we have already prayed, may God form us in the likeness of Christ so that our lives may glorify God and the world may see God's glory.

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