

Sermon preached at St John the Baptist, Devizes

20th October 2019 (18th Sunday after Trinity)

Epistle: 2Tim 3:14 – 4:5

My brothers and sisters, I would ask that you pray for me that I may speak to you in the name of the living God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

How do you react to and deal with Bible readings that seem to go against our idea of an all-loving God? In our NT reading this morning, we heard:

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness.

This short section of a short letter is not short when it comes to the number of times it gets used by others. As a quick internet search will show you, it is a popular verse to quote if you are trying to show that every word of the Bible is literally true. All scripture... all of it... every word! Taking every single word of the Bible as literally and precisely true can lead to some conclusions which are not unheard of, even in the Church of England, but which I think most of us here would shy away from, such as:

- Creationism: that Creation took place precisely as described in the first chapters of Genesis, that evolution is no better than a fantasy and the Earth is not 5 billion years old, but a mere 6000 or so.
- That women cannot occupy any position of authority over men in a church^{*}, should not speak in church[†] and must cover their heads[‡]. (to reiterate – these are conclusions that *some* Christians have come to, I am not saying that I agree with them!)

* 2Tim 2:12

† 1Co 14:34-35

‡ 1Co 11

- And my personal favourite – pay attention those of you who still have the delight of regular Maths lessons in your lives – that the number pi is exactly equal to 3[§].

So literalism might not be a conclusion we're comfortable with.

Alternatively, you might be thinking that a piece of scripture claiming that all scripture is inspired by God is something of a circular argument. Is it the equivalent of someone saying – perhaps on a certain widely-read Twitter account, for example – ‘it must be true because I said it’? No, that doesn't really apply here. ‘Scripture’ in this passage definitely means what we call the Old Testament because, at the time the letters to Timothy were written, several books of the New Testament hadn't even been written and, in any case, we were several centuries away from agreeing on exactly what was and wasn't going to form the New Testament.

So: ‘all scripture [OT] is inspired by God and is useful...’. Is this how we treat the Old Testament, in practice? At the risk of asking an uncomfortable question, when was the last time you heard an Old Testament passage preached on, or used for teaching? I'm not claiming the answer is never, but it's probably been a while. We certainly use the New Testament a lot, we hear it preached on a lot, but what about the Old?

This is not a situation unique to our church. As part of my training course, about thirty of us from across the Diocese, and wider, were asked to make a list of all the times the OT was used, referred to or preached on in services we attended. The overall conclusion was not never, to be sure, but it was closer to, erm, ‘not a lot’. In fact, ‘hardly at all’ would probably be fair.

There are certainly some cultural obstacles to appreciating the OT more. It does sometimes seem that many Christians treat the Old Testament as, at best, a children's storybook (Noah and the Flood, David & Goliath, Jonah and the Whale). And the

[§] From 1Ki 7:23 (repeated at 2Chr 4:2) a circular object with a diameter of 10 and a circumference of 30 would mean $\pi = 3.0$

problem with thinking of the Old Testament as a children's storybook is that it then tends to be regarded by adults as a bit of faintly amusing nonsense that shouldn't be taken terribly seriously. It also doesn't help that, when comedians want to satirise the Bible, they almost always parody the literary style of the Old Testament: take anything written in a suitably ponderous, pedantic and repetitive style, read it out in a thin sanctimonious voice, throw in a few begats and unpronounceable names and hey presto – it almost writes itself. Monty Python did it particularly well.

Those are some cultural issues people might have with the OT. But even if you can overcome these cultural issues, if you do regularly delve into the OT as an adult – perhaps at MP or in your own time – it sometimes doesn't take long before you come across a passage which can make you very uncomfortable, to say the least. Stonings^{**}, genocide^{††}, infanticide^{‡‡}, rape^{§§}, war crimes^{***} ... you name it, you can probably find it in the Old Testament and, worse, you can find it being presented as a specific request and requirement of God. To widen our net, the New Testament also has plenty of passages that we tend not to dwell on for similar reasons, often because of the way they seem to refer to women, for example. Have you ever heard someone say – perhaps from that lectern just there – 'This is the word of the Lord' and thought to yourself 'I'm not so sure', or found it difficult to respond sincerely 'Thanks be to God'? I certainly have. Perhaps it's no wonder we – and the Lectionary we follow! – sometimes keep some passages of the Bible at arm's length.

So where does that leave us? Is 'ignoring the difficult bits' the best response to have? Let's go back to the original statement: 'all scripture is inspired by God'. Now, the word being translated as 'inspired' here is *theopneustos*, which some translations render literally as 'God-breathed'. Being breathed by God is not necessarily the same thing as saying that everything described as being heard or understood was correctly heard, understood

^{**} A particularly nasty example can be found at Num 15:32-36

^{††} Saul's punishment for not destroying every last thing of the Amalekites in 1Sam 15 is a challenging example

^{‡‡} Joshua 6:21, for example

^{§§} Judges 19:23-30 makes particularly unpleasant reading for a modern audience

^{***} Deuteronomy 7 clearly requires the Israelites to utterly destroy those they defeat in battle.

or acted upon. In fact, the Bible regularly shows us times when humans misunderstand or misinterpret, when they are *wrongly* inspired by their experience of the divine. I've never counted, but I'm not sure there aren't more examples of the disciples misunderstanding Jesus and his message in the Gospels than actually getting it right. Jesus certainly gets a bit testy about it sometimes: 'O faithless generation... How long am I to bear with you?'^{†††} He sometimes expresses it in a rather more loving way too: 'Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip?'^{‡‡‡}.

The best description of this issue that I know – and also the best advice about how to deal with it – comes from Rowan Williams:

[The Bible] is what God *wants* you to hear... [h]e wants you to hear law and poetry and history... the polemic and the visions. He wants you to listen to the letters and think about the chronicles. And, from the earliest days, Christians, like Jews before them and Jews now, wrestle with how exactly you can then say 'This is the word of the Lord'... This may be the word of God, but why exactly is it important to God that you know it?

The Bible is, you might say, God telling us a... whole sequence of parables. God is saying 'This is how people heard me, saw me, responded to me; this is the gift I gave them; this is the response they made'.^{§§§}

When I used to come across unpleasant passages in the Bible, they just used to irritate me, as if they were stumbling blocks maliciously put in the way of my faith. Now, though, I try to take a step back and ask myself 'why is it that God is presenting me with this, and why now?'. Has this story of, say, immense shocking cruelty carried out in the name of God been put in front of me today to remind me of something that's in the

^{†††} Mk 9:19

^{‡‡‡} Jn 9:19

^{§§§} Rowan Williams (2014). *Being Christian*, pages 25-27

news? Or something closer to home? Is it something that I can respond to, positively, now in the name of my loving God? Who am I, or where am I in this story?

It's not always easy, but I recommend you try this the next time you hear someone say 'This is the word of the Lord' and find yourself thinking 'I'm not so sure'. If you find some bits of the Bible rather unlovable, it might help you to think of them not as just anomalous examples of children's stories, horrible misogyny or racist genocide but rather as another means by which our loving God tries to hold up a mirror to our actions and require a response from us. Another means by which God tries endlessly to make the message of grace, forgiveness, reconciliation and love – above all, love – clearer to a world that still finds it so difficult to hear and act upon.