

BIBLE SUNDAY 26 OCTOBER 2008

One of my tutors used to get quite cross with people who used the bible as if it were a sort of recipe book.

Someone was seeking guidance for the path that he should take in life. So he simply opened the bible, shut his eyes and plonked his index finger on a verse - he found Matthew 27 - 5

And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself.

Lord, you surely cannot mean that. Please let me have another go. This time it was Luke 10:37 - *Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise.*

Frankly this is a potty way to run one's life. The Bible is not a Recipe Book, with a set menu for every day. But listen to the introduction to a modern Commentary.

The Bible is the world's best-selling book. It has been translated into more languages than any other book in history. And it has been honoured over the ages as a unique book - a book given by God Himself, containing a timeless message for all human beings, everywhere.

Of course, other faiths have sacred books. But none compares with the Bible. It is a unique book. This collection of 66 works by many different authors, written and compiled over a span of some 1,600 years, is the only book that can support a claim to have been inspired by God Himself. It is the only book that accurately conveys the message God intends to communicate to humanity — and to you and me. How important, then, that you and I read Scripture carefully and intelligently. How important that we have some grasp of how each of the over 1,100 chapters of the Bible fits into the whole. How important to sense the contribution each chapter makes to our understanding of God, and to deepening our relationship with Him.

Yes it IS important and the key words CAREFULLY and INTELLIGENTLY are most important too.

So today I want to tackle a few issues, rather than preaching on a particular text.

First, I want to talk about the Old Testament. This is the collection of scriptures, books and writings set apart by the Hebrew people as sacred, which tell the story of their relationship with God. Old Testament events are set in the cradle of ancient civilizations, the broad area known as the “Fertile Crescent.”

The Old Testament’s story of the Jewish people covers some 2,000 years before the birth of Jesus. A series of great empires came and went in both the north and in the south in those early years.

But the Old Testament isn’t primarily a history book. It has to *include* history to show the developing relationship with the God and the people who called themselves his Chosen. Of course most of the 39 books contain stories about the past. But there is also a hymn book, a couple of books of writings about the last days (called eschatology, just to put people off). There is love poetry of a fairly erotic nature. There are vast sets of rules to govern the way life that was to be lived.

One of the key things to remember is that most of the Old Testament was only set down in final form long after the events themselves happened, and I think all shades of churchmanship and scholarship accept that. Much of the content was originally passed from generation to generation in the form of sacred stories - camp fire stories if you like- that were heard and repeated often, so that the history and the stories were passed down. Oh yes, there were miscellaneous assorted bits and pieces of manuscript kept in the temple archives, and in the royal archives too.

Our first reading tells of the re-discovery of what was probably part of the book Deuteronomy - and the effect it had on the people. This happened as the people began to return after the exile.

And the exile is the critical point in the story. As they sat in a foreign land, away from the place that God had chosen as his own, they mourned and they worried. Over the generations they had struggled to pull a nation state together out of 12 tribes of people, having subdued the area and made Jerusalem the capital; they had learned that there

was but one true living God, who had been with them in their history, who had a binding contract - covenant - with them and who had Himself chosen Jerusalem. So they were desperate to answer this question: Why had God failed to protect them? Why had he broken his covenant?

And the priests and elders in Babylon held an enquiry. They assembled absolutely everything that had been smuggled out as they left Jerusalem, and, together with all those who were experts in the law and the verbal tradition, they conducted a hearing and examination. They were lucky in one respect - they had been settled in a single place by Nebuchadnezzar. The deported Jews formed their own community in Babylon and retained their religion, practices, and philosophies.

They called themselves the "gola," ("exiles"), or the "bene gola" ("the children of the exiles"), and within the depths of despair and hopelessness, they forged a new national identity and a new religion. The Jews in Babylon creatively remade themselves and their world view. In particular, they blamed the disaster of the Exile on their own impurity.

As they went back through all the history, as they wrote down all the tales that had been passed down mouth to mouth, they asked this question at every point: what did we do wrong? And they blamed themselves for worshipping other gods, for not keeping the laws. They had betrayed Yahweh and allowed the Mosaic laws and religion to become corrupt; the Babylonian Exile was proof of almighty God's displeasure. They concluded that this must be the explanation - they not God, had broken the covenant. When they returned they must do better..

So this period is marked by a renewal of Jewish tradition, as the exiles looked back to their origins in an effort to revive their original religion. It is most likely that the Torah - the Law - took its final shape during this period or shortly afterward, and that it became the central text of the Jewish faith at this time as well.

Then there was another happy chance: Cyrus the Persian conquered Mesopotamia, he allowed the Jews to return home. This was no

ordinary event, though. Cyrus sent them home specifically to worship Yahweh. As a result what was once only a relatively small kingdom would become the nation of God.

Why have I gone into such detail? Well, when you read some of the Old Testament texts you have to remember that they are not history as such, but perhaps an account set down by people who wanted the history to have been like that. So for example David, a bandit, a rebel, a murderer and adulterer became the central figure of what was thought to be a golden age. Golden in hindsight of course - it probably wasn't anything like that at the time. This isn't to say that the accounts of the Old Testament are *untrue*, merely that we need to understand why they came out in the way that they did.

So then, the Bible is a collection of writings before and after Christ, which point us to God. A set of writings which show their understanding of his dealings with humankind in the past, and lastly, his revelation of himself in Jesus.

And we need to take very seriously what Jesus himself says about the Hebrew Bible: Do not think I have come to destroy the law or the prophets. I have not come to destroy them but to fulfil them. This is the truth I tell you—until the heaven and the earth shall pass away, the smallest letter or smallest part of any letter shall not pass away from the law, until all things in it shall be performed. Yet Jesus broke the law of the sabbath and the purity rules. He broke many of the table laws by eating with sinners. He actually touched lepers, he allowed women to touch him. So how could he fulfill the law?

I think that what Jesus says **will** pass away is this great man-made structure of special rules, and sub rules and sub sub rules - books of them built up since the exiles in an attempt to maintain the purity of the Jewish religion. The law that Jesus speaks of is God's law as revealed through him. And Jesus said, as we heard at the start of the service: Love God totally, and love your fellow human being just like yourself. That is what will never pass away. That is what he came both to demonstrate and to fulfill.

After the Gospels, the rest of the New Testament gives us the story

of the very early spread of the good News, the teaching of the apostles who knew Jesus and of Paul, who met him in a vision. In 2 Timothy 3 we read: All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work .

On Bible Sunday I believe this gives us the key. Paul is talking about the Old Testament when he speaks of scripture. He says it is inspired by God - 'God breathed' as one modern translation puts it. God was there on the banks of the Chebar as the committee struggled to get the Scriptures sorted out and written down. God was there at the camp fires when the words were passed down the generations. God was there in the events themselves. God breathes through all the process of transmission of the Old Testament.

Yet it is a work of both God and man. And what I cannot take seriously is that we should hold every word to be inerrant, meaning that the Old Testament in its original form, is totally without error, and free from all contradiction. The Bible is the work of God and man together and so we must use all our God given faculties to study it.

What of the New Testament? This too is God breathed. The New Testament attests to the saving work of Jesus Christ as God's living word, God become human, to show us the true nature of God. I therefore give greater weight to the New Testament in my life and ministry. I learn of Jesus, of God's redeeming love, and of the nature of God's judgement of our actions. We see clearly that what we do now matters in the hereafter. We see that the Kingdom of heaven has already started here on earth with Jesus: Luke 4:21 "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing".

So on Bible Sunday there is a huge amount to think about and to pray about. It is precious, priceless, inspired and quite amazing. We need to read it carefully and intelligently, to study what it meant then, what it means now and ask ourselves what we should do about it. It isn't a silly recipe book. But it **is** a book to lead us to God and to help us to engage with God about what he wants us to do to bring in His kingdom.