

HOW TO READ THE BIBLE

The topic which I have been asked to speak on is how to read the Bible as the third talk in our series on the Bible.

Well it's obvious, isn't it, you open the book and sit down and read it end of sermon.

Or is it. In his book Gospel for Muslims, Steve Bell writes of how we read the Bible with western eyes ... and western eyes which so often have become so used to the Bible phrases that we do not notice things which bounce off the page to people from other cultures and traditions. He quotes the example of the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15). We do not see when reading Jesus' parable just how scandalous to middle eastern eyes, and indeed to traditional African eyes, were the actions of the old man running to meet his prodigal son. In so doing we miss important elements in the parable.

Similarly when we read the 23rd Psalm we have a picture of a gentle shepherd - one man and his dog. We forget perhaps 1 Samuel 17 where David going off to fight Goliath points out that he is his father's shepherd, fighting off lions and bears and battering them to death. To the writer of the Psalms, a shepherd would be a strong determined defender rather than a gentle comforter. We read things in different ways. Jesus recognised this for we read in Luke's Gospel how a lawyer asked Jesus "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said "What is written in the Law; what is your reading of it".

So it's not so obvious how to read the Bible as we might think. There are many ways to read the Bible - but there are some principles which I have found to be important and it may be helpful not least to me to think about some of them. Now I have been told that a good sermon contains three main points - so I'm going to ignore that and talk about five points.

The first main point is actually to read the Bible itself. This is what it was designed for - to be read and read aloud - if you recall Jesus in the Synagogue in Nazareth, he took down the scroll, opened it and read it to the congregation. So before you reach for a Bible commentary or help notes, read the Bible for yourself.

There are plenty of authors who want to peddle their pet interpretation and support it by selective quotations - just think of the JW's on the

street corners supplying (for a donation) books with titles like 'what the bible says' and 'let god be true' but they are only the tip of an iceberg of people promoting their own fantasies and trying to back them up by a raft of quotations carefully selected and usually out of context.

There are a number of good reasons why before you read a book of the Bible section by section you should read the whole book. Even where the book is a collection of different elements - such as Leviticus, Psalms or Proverbs, it is worth skim reading the whole book. You get a feel for the structure and pattern of the book, you get an idea of where it is going (this is rather like looking at the last chapter of a novel before you read it) but more importantly, you begin to see what the author is getting at, what is his argument, what he (and it was a he) wants the reader or the hearer to get out of it. It makes sense: after all Paul wrote his letters as letters, not as materials for an academic treatise.

Also, take a book like Job. You will get so much more out of studying the book if you appreciate what is going on - the scene setting, Job's complaint, the three cycles of well meaning and, in human terms, very rational advice, Job's conversation with God and then the conclusion of the whole piece. You then appreciate what the main thrust of the book is. Then you have a framework idea in your mind of how it all fits together and can appreciate much more the individual parts of the book as you read it through with help notes and / or a commentary.

A further suggestion about reading the Bible itself is to get a reliable modern translation with which you are comfortable (NRSV or REB) **not** a retelling - these have their places but not for a faithful reading of the Bible. There are two reasons for getting a modern translation. The first is that language changes and words subtly change their meanings - a good example is the word 'prevent' changing from going before to stopping. Now I like the old translations - the Song of Songs in the AV is one of the most beautiful pieces of C17 literature that I know - and I delight in reading my Wycliffe in its Middle English: but the antique language gets in the way of the studying of God's word.

The second is that modern translations will give better translation of Greek or Hebrew - either because we know more about the original language or because there are newer more accurate words in modern English. We will, perhaps, never sort out some of the linguistic problems - for example whether it was a camel or a rope which was to get through the eye of a needle - there have been long treatises written on what *gamla* in Aramaic would have been taken to mean. But the

main point is still get a good translation.

My second main point is to read the Bible with appreciation of the different ways in which it speaks to us. The Bible is unlike other religions' holy books. The Koran is primarily a book of instruction - very similar in form throughout. The Upanishads are largely philosophical discussions about the nature of the world and its meaning. The Bible on the other hand is a library, books approaching in different ways the story of God's dealing with the people whom he has created and whom he is redeeming. The library contains books of poetry (Song of Songs), philosophy (Job and Ecclesiastes), history (Exodus, Chronicles - and most of all the three synoptic Gospels), letters, visions - the whole richness of human understanding and culture is in that library - but the theme is the same throughout that of God's dealing with us.

So read each book for what it is. Read Leviticus as rules for living rather than as a philosophical treatise on the nature of humanity and Ecclesiastes as a philosophical treatise rather than as a rule for life. Read Mark as a narrative and John as an explanation: or more properly as an explication - that is making explicit - what is implicit in the life, death and teaching of Jesus; the Christ, the Messiah.

So read the Library but we must remember that the books were written at a particular time - the writings deal with eternal truths about what it is to be human, to be a sinner, to be redeemed, to live as God intended - but the authors knew nothing about the European Union, the environmental crisis of global warming or the Higgs boson as a fundamental particle of atomic structure. The Bible does not deal with our concerns in 2016 but it does address the fundamentals things which lie behind them, curiosity, greed, identity, self regard, and above all the need for salvation.

The best example of what I mean is the story of Job; a story about a man - a rich farmer in the late bronze age - whose life was very different from ours in Southsea. In reading this we shouldn't get bogged down with marginal questions of whether he existed, where was Uz or whether the story is just a parable - the story is much more important than that. It explores the problem, which we all face in every age, of why it is that good people suffer and how they should deal with their suffering - and although that story has a happy ending, the story doesn't promise that this will always be the case - it's as realistic now as three thousand years ago and as it will be as long as people exist.

This is perhaps especially important to bear in mind when we are looking at prophecy. The Revelation to St John has suffered more than most books from people taking it out of its time and trying to use it for prediction rather than looking at the deeper message of the vision of the surpassing glory of God, of how his love for us puts all human disaster into context, and of what God's kingdom would be. Looking at the history of the church we will find, however, that many people have tried to use that book as a divine sudoku puzzle which if we can solve it will tell us when the world will come to an end. A search on the internet will show at least 250 different dates based on Revelation: the JW's alone have had seven dates. This may seem amusing - but the real sadness is that people have been distracted from the true message of the book by using it as a calculator.

My third point is that reading it is not a duty, it is not a task or chore, it is an exploration. In reading the text we explore to understand more of the good purposes of God and also more about ourselves and how we stand with God. It is at this point that Bible notes and commentaries come into their own - they can be your compass or your sat nav as you progress on the personal pilgrimage - but if you regard them as more than tools and especially if they become a substitute for your own journey, you will be like an armchair traveller not an explorer.

The more we explore the more we find. The more carefully we read the text, the more we are able to explore and the deeper the truths we will discover.

This is true, even of those parts of scripture which have often been considered slight and superficial. Take for example the third letter of John. At first sight it is little more than a personal letter to Gaius - a mere fourteen verses long - praising Gaius for his loyalty to the brethren, saying that Demetrius is a good guy, and commenting on the self importance of Diotrophes - just a common or garden letter

Explore a little deeper and you find that what is being applauded is kindness to fellow believers who are clearly struggling in a world of unbelievers - even though they weren't local friends: just as we should support the church in Muslim or Hindu countries.

Then we look more closely at Diotrophes, whose harmful actions have developed out of his self importance. It's certainly a warning to those of us who are politicians to be careful of self publicity. And then he says - in the context of Diotrophes - that the evil doer has never seen God.

There is a clear implication here that the self important person makes himself his own God: the ultimate idolatry.

Explore further and what we realise is that John is laying out the framework for a Christian community - concern for each other, concern for fellow Christians you don't know, concern that you don't, even inadvertently, seek to push yourself forward - to take the highest seat at the feast as Jesus put it.

And this brings us to the fourth point, which is that you read the Bible as building blocks for your life. In the same way that beams fit into brickwork and the roof fits onto the beams so the books of the Bible, although they are so very different in their style and their intention, fit together to produce a coherent whole. But if you confine your reading to just sitting and meditating on the bit you are reading today, the whole will never fit together and at best it will provide 'add ons' to your life and not become the core of life. So, how do we make it fit together?

The best way is to keep some sort of record of what you have discovered in your exploration. The notes don't have to be long. Some people even make them in the margin of their Bible: I have never liked this for two reasons - first when your Bible wears out and you dispose of it you will lose all the notes and second there is rarely enough space. But do make notes because we all have faulty memories and easily forget that very important thing we thought last night.

So what goes into the notes - it can be the thoughts which you have about a passage, it may be especially important to make links, especially links to what Jesus taught and did. But always make a note of what effect the Bible section has had on you - you aren't writing an academic thesis: you are building cairns of understanding to guide you, especially when the mists and fogs of life get in the way of seeing where to go.

The last point is that we need to read the Bible prayerfully. Indeed the careful reading of the Bible is itself a prayer to God because we are contemplating what God is saying to us and by thinking it through and deciding how it will affect our own lives we are offering ourselves back to God.

As well as the act of reading being itself a prayer, it is always wise to start reading our Bible with a moment of prayer. The Bible can be pretty explosive stuff - it can certainly challenge our prejudices, it can annoy

us, it can irritate us, it can vex us - it is certainly not comfort food! And so we can be driven off course - some say that it is Satan, I am more inclined to think that it is the old me with all my prejudices and peculiarities getting in the way of God. Whatever may be the cause - the best way to deal with this is through prayer that the Spirit will lead you into the way of truth.

And so where have we got to - five points

read the Bible first

read the different books in different ways

read the Bible as an exploring seeking Gods truth and guidance

read and note the Bible as the building blocks of life

read the Bible prayerfully

And since the last is prayer - let us pray

Holy Spirit, come to each and every one of us as we read our Bibles, lead us into truth, not just into abstract truths, but to seeing truths which will transform our lives and bring glory to your name. Amen