

Sermon Notes

St Mark's Anglican Church
South Hurstville

Pentecost 21

Preacher

21 October 2007

**The Reverend Chris Albany
Rector**

Readings: Jeremiah 31.27-34; Psalm 121; 2 Timothy 3.10-4.5; Luke 18.1-14

Bible God's words

Pam was talking to Katy, mother of Genevieve aged 2 and a bit this week. Katy had found Genevieve in her room with pile of nappies scattered across the floor. When Katy asked, "How did this happen?" Genevieve picks up her stuffed doll Miffy and says, "Miffy why did you do this?" I think the Hebrew writers of Genesis got the bit about human nature and accepting responsibility for our behaviour spot on! Its about the Bible and how we understand it that I want to focus on today. Especially the 2 Timothy passage.

"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." . What does this inspired or God breathed mean? Bill Loader suggests there are four possibilities:

1. *These are the words of the Lord*
2. *This is the word of the Lord* to be weighed selectively
3. *In this is the word of the Lord* to be engaged openly, including critically
4. *Your word is a lamp for our feet, a light for our path* beyond right and wrong.

Approaching Scripture from the perspective of right and wrong runs the risk of missing what is probably the most common reason why people approach Scripture. Instructions are only part of it. The stories of God's engagement with people, witnessed to by writers from ancient Israel and from the first century of the Christian church, give us much more. Themselves inspired by such encounters, they inspire us to engage in new ways with God, with ourselves and with others. When we seek to live in the community where these stories are told and retold, something of their life and their hope catches us. The Word meets us, challenges us and engages us."

See <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/scripture.htm>

It helps us to an owned faith. And it seems to me that owned faith is the only kind of faith which ultimately matters and will satisfy us. A faith that is tried and tested and stands up against the crucible of our own experience and helps us give meaning to the things that happen to us and in our world and to find value and purpose. The bible contains the primary stories and traditions that disclose the character and will of God. The traditional phrase for describing this is "the Bible is the revelation of God". A revelation which is expressed in words. But the Bible is not the words of God, not literally God's words rather it is the words of its human authors and compilers seeking to give expression to their understanding of God and God's place in the scheme of things.

To those who might want to suggest that the Biblical texts are literally God's words and so must be accepted completely and at face value we need to say, "I doubt it." I doubt that God asks us to kill disobedient children, requires us to stone to death those who break the Sabbath. I doubt that God zapped a couple who withheld a portion of their land sale, that Jesus will cast those who don't bear good fruit into a fire or that love of enemies can be reconciled with the destruction of much of humanity at the end time - all of which are claims of the Old or New testament.

In light of all this the response that is traditionally used at the end of our readings, “Hear the Word of the Lord” is probably somewhat misleading. It needs unpacking so we understand it in a metaphorical rather than literal way. I think the New Zealand church has it much more helpfully with their “Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church” or an Eremos friend “hear the Spirit of the Word”. Now if this talk of questioning scripture unsettles you a little let me suggest that we are in good company. That the Gospels show us a questioning or doubting Jesus when it comes to the Hebrew scriptures and Hebrew tradition.

I am grateful to Jack Nelson - Pallmeyer in his challenging book “Is Religion Killing Us?” for introducing me to this idea of not doubting Thomas but doubting Jesus. He writes, “Jesus was a radical Jew who doubted and challenged many of the assumptions of the Hebrew Scriptures and many of the popular ideas held with sure conviction by his contemporaries.” p 142.

Here is an edited form of an informal dialogue that Jack postulates between “doubting Jesus” and his tradition.

- Our sacred text claims that favourable weather is a conditional blessing. Obey God and you will have all that is necessary for a good harvest; disobey God and experience drought or flood (Lev 26:4 and Gen 6-7). This depicts a God who is punishing and vindictive but I say to you God isn't like that. God makes his sun rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on righteous and unrighteous alike.
- Our sacred text and our religious contemporaries say that those who break Sabbath regulations threaten to bring God's wrath on the nation and should be killed (Num 15 and Mark 3:6) In these words you hear of a violent capricious God who desires holiness more than God values human life. But I say to you that God is not like that. The Sabbath is a gift from a gracious God and not a burden and civil disobedience is often a requirement of faith (Mark 2:27, 3:1-6)
- Our sacred text says God is God because of superior violence Deut (4, Exodus 15) and that salvation has to do with defeat of enemies (Ps 18:45-48) who are to be hated because they are also the enemies of God. But I say to you that those who use violence perish by violence (Matt26:52) and that we should love our enemies and pray for our persecutors because only then can we break the spiral of violence that afflicts our world.
- Our sacred text tells us that we are God's own and chosen people and that we are to keep ourselves from associating with those who are “unclean” or “impure” else we be cast out along with them, but I tell you that God is welcoming and inclusive of all and that God often uses those others reject to convey his message of compassion and justice. (John 5 Luke 10). P 142ff

You get the message – I am sure that without too much thought you can add other examples of you own. Sometimes I think we collectively as Christians, the church as a whole, have a long way to go to show that we have fully heard and are living out the message of Jesus. Perhaps its just too discomfort making and we and our predecessors in faith have been too ready to domesticate his message into one that fits more easily into our patterns of manipulation and use of power over and against others.

Now I say all this not in order to unsettle you, or make you feel that there is no firm basis on which to base our faith – to the contrary. I am convinced that Jesus shows us that we can be sure we are on solid ground. God is for us and with us, not over against us. We are never alone in this adventure we call life, for there is nowhere where God is not and death has no more dominion over us. But I am also convinced that the survival of the world as we know it depends on our willingness to revision divine and human power. To name as the lie that it is any attempt to recruit God onto “our side” especially if and when that involves a legitimising of violence or oppression or exploitation be that in the realm of international relations; in the church over issues of gender and sexuality for example; or in the workplace or in the home.

It is true that like all of us, the authors of scripture are both insightful and fallible, that therefore they both reveal God for us and also at times give a distorted image of God. The test I find helpful is how does what they say fit with the understanding of God Jesus portrays for us. For if it is true that he is the author and finisher of our faith, the one who most clearly reveals God and God's ways for us then we have no better place to go than to him and to seek to model our faith and our living on him.

A necessary corollary of that is that if Jesus doubted then so can we. So question boldly, doubt often and find your faith strengthened and deepened and sustaining.
