

Sermon Notes

St Mark's Anglican Church
South Hurstville

Epiphany 3

21 January 2007

Preacher
The Reverend Chris Albany
Rector

Readings: Nehemiah 8.1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; 1Corinthians 12.12-31; Luke 4.14-21.

The Bible – true, in what way?

Today's Old Testament reading and Psalm highlight the central place that God's people in the Judeo-Christian tradition have given to their sacred writings. For the people of Nehemiah's time this was the Book of the Law or the Torah – the first 5 books of the Old Testament as we know it today, containing the commands or precepts of God. By the time of Jesus this body of sacred writings had grown to include the Psalms and the writings of the prophets the reading of which had a central place in Synagogue and Temple worship. Today I want to focus on the issue of how we understand and use the scriptures today in the light of modern scholarship.

The assertion that the Bible is true and is to be understood as the Word of God, or to put it another way God's words to us, with the implication that its contents are not the compilations of human authors but rather that God is the author, is a great stumbling block to many people. With such an assertion more often than not there is the demand that the Bible has to be accepted as true in its entirety – that there is no inconsistency in scripture because God does not contradict Godself. So people feel that they have to disengage their rational thinking when it comes to reading the Bible and cannot use the same critical thinking and analysis that they might bring to any other text. Indeed it is probably not going too far to say that the insistence, by a considerable segment of the Christian Church, that this is how the bible is to be approached is of itself the single greatest obstacle to people taking Christianity seriously. Yes they have a sense that their spirituality is important, have no problem with the concept of God and are interested in exploring issues of life and faith but faced with the demand, for example that they take the Genesis accounts of creation seriously (at face value – as science if you like), or with the insistence that some of Paul's words about the roles of men and women in family and church are to be taken as definitive for all time, or that the last word on human sexuality is contained in a literal reading of a small number of verses addressed to a specific context – faced with such demands many people understandably turn away rejecting the Bible in its entirety. Seeing that as the only alternative.

There is an ancient Chinese (I think) proverb which goes something like, "When faced with a choice of 2 and only 2 mutually exclusive alternatives (either equally attractive or unattractive) then choose the third option. Which I guess is saying there are always many more options than we first think.

Such is the case with our approach to and understanding of scripture. There are other options than accepting it in a literal, fundamentalist way, or giving it little if any credence and value. Modern Biblical scholarship over the past century or so has drawn on the same academic scholarship and insights as are used in other areas of historical and literary study to help us understand much more clearly this set of writings that our faith and tradition has given a special place to – as the corpus or body of sacred texts. This has helped us see how they have come to be in the form we know them now; an individual part often not the work of a single person but the compilation of material from a variety of sources.

Sadly one of the things we clergy and preachers have been guilty of has been leaving such critical biblical scholarship behind in the Seminary. Often motivated by the best of reasons, not wanting to

undermine people's preconceptions, fearing that to begin to question a reading of the Bible at face value will undermine people's faith. In so doing we have not only sold people short, but also the Gospel itself. We need to harness and use the best academic Biblical scholarship to enable us to read the Bible afresh; it can be akin to reading the Bible again for the first time as Marcus Borg suggests in the provocative title of one of his books. "Reading the Bible Again for the First Time" has helped many people to put the Bible back into its proper place as the book we need to immerse ourselves in if we are to fully understand what it is to be human called into relationship with the God who reveals Godself supremely in the person of Jesus the Christ. To indeed help us see that the Bible is true, in that it points us to the truth about God and about humankind and how we are called to live and be in our relationships with each other, the earth and all of creation.

Let me explain what I mean by saying the, 'Bible is true' in two ways.

Firstly by looking briefly at the Genesis accounts of creation at the very beginning of the Judeo Christian scriptures. Now I know that for some, perhaps most, of you what I am about to say is nothing new, but I hope you will bear with me, for the sake of those for whom it is. The first thing, which needs to be said, is that Genesis contains 2 different and at times contradictory accounts of creation. The first in Genesis chapter 1 which splits creation into 7 days, well 6 really because on the 7th day God rested. Unless like Finn's mother in my most favourite of books "Mr God this is Anna" you see that rest itself to be the greatest act of creation. But that's another story and another sermon! This account begins with God and chaos (or formless void), into which God speaks and creates Light and Dark, Night and Day, and then successively sky and earth and seas and vegetation and then sun and moon and stars (begging the question of whence the earlier light and dark?) and then sea creatures and birds and then animals and finally humankind – "male and female God created them" Genesis 1 tells us.

The second account is quite different. After creating the earth and heavens, before there are any plants or animals, God creates a male human being, from the dust of the earth and then plants a garden in Eden and then creates animals and birds and the fish of the sea, and then because none of these is found to be a worthy helpmate for the man, God makes the man fall into a deep sleep and fashions woman from one of his ribs.

Now what is quite clear from all this is that we were never intended to take all this literally. This is not history, not science that is recorded here. If that had been the understanding of the ancient Hebrew compilers would they have given us two, such differing accounts? I suspect not, but they had no problem in putting two different, conflicting accounts side by side. Each of these creation stories had grown out of their oral tradition, going back into the mists of time and pre-history. Each in their own way contains truth, as is the case with all good stories. They help convey understanding of what it is to be human, of what humankind is like and of our relationship to God and the earth and all of creation.

What the compilers of these stories are saying is, "This is how we understand ourselves to be, and the way humankind has always been." First and foremost there is the assertion that God is, and is the one who is the creative force behind this world, the source of all life and being. All that is, humans included, have been brought into being by and are dependent on this Creator God. There is the profound insight that human beings are made in the image of God and that what God has created is good, very good in fact. Also revealed in these creation accounts is the understanding that humankind has a special pre-eminent place in creation and is called to exercise stewardship over the earth. What is also revealed is that humankind is created to enjoy intimacy with God, an intimacy that is broken by disobedience. Not accepting one's creatureliness, but wanting to usurp the place of God. Broken also by a failure to accept responsibility, but rather pass the buck and put the blame elsewhere. Sound familiar? There is great truth in all this. But if we were to say to the writers of

Genesis, “ You mean God created everything in 7 days? and which came first humans or animals? You seem to be having a bet both ways!” They would laugh at us and say’ “Wrong question. These stories are not about that kind of fact or truth.” We don’t and can’t know the answers to those questions and it doesn’t matter.

All this means that we don’t have to see science and religion as being in competition with each other. It is possible to accept the scientific understanding of the origins and development of life – Big Bang theory and evolution etc and also see that there is a creative entity (that we call God) behind it all. I am grateful to Mike Costello for giving me a quote from Albert Einstein, “*Religion without science is blind. Science without religion is lame.*” In other words they need and complement each other.

I’ve already alluded to the second example of the way in which the Bible is true. It is the way in which the story or message of the scriptures resonates within us, because it addresses us and our experience of what it is to be human. It is not just that here is The Story of God and God’s people, but here we find our own story. We find ourselves described, addressed, and challenged. So the same passage of scripture may speak to each of us differently, or in a different way at different times depending on what is happening in our life. In that sense it comes to us as if it is a personal word, addressed to us specifically. A word from God, as if God is confronting us as we are brought face to face with ourselves. As The Story becomes our story. I’m sure that this is what the writer to the Hebrews was alluding to when he/she says, “The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two edged sword.”

All of this I hope, helps us to put the Bible into its rightful place. We devalue it if we dismiss it because we can’t take it literally; that’s like throwing the baby out with the bathwater. But we also devalue it if we say it all has to be taken at face value; that one has to accept unquestioningly the truth of “the plain reading of the text” as some put it. That too is to undersell the value and significance of the Bible. It can withstand much more rigorous analysis and scrutiny than that. It’s kind of like replacing the baby with the bathwater. So if you were to ask me, “is the Bible true?” I’d say, “Wrong question.” The way I prefer to put it is to say the Bible contains truth. It points us to and confronts us with the truth about God and truth about ourselves and how we are to live and be in relation to God, each other and all of creation. As such it is immensely valuable and important and we need to read it uncommonly often.