



18th January 2009
The Second Sunday after Epiphany
Choral Evensong
Micah 6 vv. 6–15
Matthew 7 vv. 12–20, 24–27

Reading the Bible as a Manifesto for Life

By The Dean, The Rev'd Duncan Dormor

The Bible is clearly in trouble: Like some endangered species, its natural habitat within our culture has shrunk dramatically and in an increasingly web-based and image dominated world it is likely to contract further. But for those who are inclined to 'take up and read' there is, I think, a further impediment (one I touch on with some trepidation).

Just between ourselves (and anyone, anywhere, who decides to download this sermon when it is placed on the web) I would like to start by making a small confession: For a long time I have recoiled from an expression which is commonplace in Christian circles, namely the idea of being a '*biblical* Christian'. Naturally, I understand some of what lies behind that expression: It is a desire to stand with that man who built his house on the rock rather than on the sand: To take a stand, to be rooted and firm as a person of faith within a fast-moving and secular world. All of this I am deeply sympathetic towards. Yet 'biblical Christian' is an unfortunate expression because it connects to certain widespread tendencies, increasingly established within contemporary Christianity, which are to my mind deeply disturbing. Naturally, such tendencies are much more firmly established at that end of the spectrum which might be termed fundamentalist, nevertheless they have wider significance because increasing numbers of people have come to believe that it is what Christians, all Christians, believe.

My first difficulty with the idea of the 'biblical Christian' is simply the implication that there is another sort. That simply isn't the case, the Bible is integral to all Christian bodies: How indeed could it be otherwise, for the Bible is the witness to Jesus Christ, to his life and death and resurrection. So, for example, members of the Church of England, to quote one official statement of the Anglican Communion:

'... affirm the sovereign authority of the Holy Scriptures as the medium through which God by his spirit communicates the word in the Church and thus enables people to respond with understanding and faith. The Scriptures are 'uniquely inspired witness to divine revelation', and 'the primary norm of Christian faith and life'

(Inter-Anglican theological and Doctrinal Commission for Lambeth Conference 1988)

That the Bible is the primary norm, the manifesto, if you will, for the life and faith of the Christian is certainly something I would wish to sign up to. But with the addition of 'biblical' comes division, a drawing of lines and distinctions between the self-proclaimed 'true and pure' Biblical Christian and the rest of us. This is no different in kind, or effect, from the distinctions drawn by the Pharisees whose exclusive righteousness draws such flak from our Lord – as we know from the gospels... *in the Bible*. The effect, and possibly the intention of self-consciously, capital B Biblical Christianity, is to create a mechanism for exclusion – uncomfortably close to that which keeps 'the tax-collector' and the 'notorious sinner' separate from the righteous.

The contents of this paper are the views and expressions of the author.

The contents may not be used without the permission of the author, more information can be obtained from chapel@joh.cam.ac.uk

©Duncan Dormor



18th January 2009
The Second Sunday after Epiphany
Choral Evensong
Micah 6 vv. 6–15
Matthew 7 vv. 12–20, 24–27

My second difficulty is, if anything, even more fundamental, and not without its ironies. It revolves around the issue of interpreting the Bible. For those Protestant Christians who are most certain and confident in their assertions that the Bible ‘says this’ or the Bible ‘says that’ can only do so because the respective ‘this’ or the ‘that’ are so firmly a part of the tradition or the culture of the community in question. Take a glimpse, for example, if you will, at some of the web comments on the current conflict in Gaza on some of the American Biblical Christianity websites. ‘The irony is that the more firmly a Christian group enshrines the exclusive authority of the Bible, the more specifically ‘what the Bible has to say’ reflects the identity of that particular community and its values. In short the authority of the Bible has been domesticated, co-opted to serve the political and other interests of the community in question.

There are two aspects to this domestication of Holy Scripture: The first involves the idea that the Bible is the Word of God; that it communicates in an unmediated fashion God’s will and intentions. And that therefore Christians can effectively use the Bible as a handbook or instruction manual for life. The second is that the Bible speaks with clarity and with one voice.

At first glance the vigour with which some biblical Christians hold to the centrality of the Bible looks like orthodoxy; like an enviable faithfulness. Yet it is exactly here, (and my mind runs easily to Matthew’s language of sheep and wolves), that there lies the greatest danger to Christianity today: For here we come very close (and this is not a word I use too often), **very close** to heresy, that is to a major distortion or twisted understanding of Christian faith – in the shape of Biblioatry, the worship of a book; of replacing the person of Christ with propositions and prescriptions, drawn from the Bible, as interpreted by particular Christian communities. In terms of the lives of individual Christians the ‘lust for certainty’ which lies at the heart of such a reading of scripture has the potential to distort and reduce the very dynamic and nature of faith itself: For it sidelines ‘the golden heart of Scripture’, what Scripture in Christian understanding exists for: namely to point to Christ, to bear witness to God’s love for humanity shown through the gift of his son.

Unlike the Bible of Milton, Donne, Blake, Rembrandt or Bach, the domesticated Bible of the fundamentalist is then like some sad and mangy animal in a zoo whose keepers aren’t quite sure what food it *should* be eating, what its daily rhythms *might* be or how much *space* to give it. In short in their desire to control and have possession of the Scriptures - they have lost touch with what brings it alive. The Bible desperately needs to be set free from such captivity.

When it comes to reading the Bible, I would suggest, inspiration and personal engagement are the keys: If we are to truly get to grips with it as Christians there are several things we must understand and do: And on the rash assumption that there may be some people in this chapel here and now who have not read much, or any of it, I make no apologies for spelling out 5 top tips:



18th January 2009
The Second Sunday after Epiphany
Choral Evensong
Micah 6 vv. 6–15
Matthew 7 vv. 12–20, 24–27

The first is simple:

LIBRARY: The Bible is a library. Approach it as such. Some books are easier and some are more important than others. Begin with the four gospels, and the letters of the New Testament; then read the first two books Genesis, Exodus; the Psalms and the Prophet Isaiah. Don't read the rest until you are acquainted with these. As with the study of any historical text, however contemporary the translation, you may need help and there are plenty of excellent guides available from the simple¹ to the most complex.

DIVERSITY

The second is to acknowledge and fully embrace the diversity of the Bible and its implications: For many, the complexity of the Bible is off-putting: Of course the Bible is complex, but another, more obvious way of putting that, is to say that it is: rich. Like a middle-Eastern Bazaar or a carnival – colourful, noisy, vibrant, - with different stalls or floats juxtaposed – popular and obscure; history, myth, poetry, wisdom: From the wrestlings of Job with the injustice of human existence; through the love poetry of the Song of Songs or the prophetic challenges like that of Micah to the rich and powerful; to the open-ended parables of Jesus; Paul's hymn to Love; or the extraordinary flight of the imagination that is the book of Revelation.

DIVINE AND HUMAN

Thirdly it is a mixture of gold and clay, of the divine and of the human: We cannot easily pan out the one from the other – the idiosyncrasies of St Paul from the eternal verities of our Maker. Some sections reward a lifetime's contemplation, others continue to perplex or even horrify. All ultimately are worthy of engaging our intellect and emotions.

Much of the Old Testament is for example primarily descriptive and despite the historical and cultural distance, through the exercise of our imaginations we can put ourselves alongside the people whose failings and shortcomings are related through its storied form. Modern heretics aside, Christians have always understood the Old Testament in the light of the New, in the light of the coming of Christ. But in addition it is also 'the soil in which his thought grew,... the alphabet in which he spelled [and]...the body of doctrine which he took over and transformed.'²

CONTEXT

Fourthly, in coming to the scriptures we inevitably bring our own worlds and contexts to the task of interpretation and understanding. So for example, certain parts of the Bible have come alive to me or acquired new sets of association because of the nature of this place. I cannot read the warning of *Ecclesiastes*: 'Of making many books there is no end; and much study is a wearying of the flesh.' without a wry smile, or if I am in more sombre mood, the contemplation of the scholar whose longevity has led him to see his work surpassed and his own books out of print. Nor can I escape the observation that *Micah's* words from this evening: 'For the rich men are full of violence' would weigh very differently with me if I eked out a fragile existence on the margins of some shanty town in the southern hemisphere.

¹ E.g. The People's Bible Commentary produced by the Bible Reading Fellowship, www.brf.org.uk or Tom Wright's series 'For Everyone' (New Testament Guides) SPCK.

² Austen Farrer, *Interpretation and Belief*, London, 1976

The contents of this paper are the views and expressions of the author.

The contents may not be used without the permission of the author, more information can be obtained from chapel@joh.cam.ac.uk

©Duncan Dormor



18th January 2009
The Second Sunday after Epiphany
Choral Evensong
Micah 6 vv. 6–15
Matthew 7 vv. 12–20, 24–27

FAITHFUL IMPROVIZATION

Finally, reading the Bible is first and foremost about our relationship with God, it is personal, in approaching the text with faith, with a baptised imagination, we are implicated; we are involved.

Pictures and metaphors of that relationship between the believer and the Bible abound. One which I have found more helpful³ than most, is to see the Scriptures as an unfinished drama script: If the creation of the world is the First Act; the Fall, related through the myth of the Garden of Eden, the Second; the story of Israel, as the chosen people, in a eventful relationship with God as the Third; and the life of the Jesus as the pivotal Fourth Act, then the Christian stands mid-way through Act Five, having seen in the history of the Church, the opening scenes of that Act. What is required of the Christian believer then is not slavish adherence to a pre-prepared text, but rather the willingness to step out and faithfully improvise, with actions guided by and rooted in a thorough understanding of what has gone before yet with an attentive ear to the prompting of the Spirit, seeking always in thought, word and deed what the Lord requires of us: 'to do justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God'. Amen

³ An extended metaphor which was I believe first proposed by the Bishop of Durham, Dr N.T. Wright.

The contents of this paper are the views and expressions of the author.

The contents may not be used without the permission of the author, more information can be obtained from chapel@joh.cam.ac.uk