

The strangest of holy books

A sermon preached by Revd Charles Draper on Bible Sunday, 27 October 2019 in St Peter's
Refs: Isaiah 45.22-end; Romans 15.1-6; Luke 4.16-24

What are we to do with the Bible? A sprawling library of 66 different texts, this strangest of holy books was written over a period of at least a thousand years by many authors, in a variety of writing styles and reflecting hugely different experiences of life. To get a sense of the vast range of times and cultures contained in this one book, imagine it was started in 1066 and is still being added to today! How do we regard and where do we start to get to know it?

Since we are Christians, followers of Jesus, I believe we must start with Jesus. Personally, I like to begin with Mark. Probably the earliest gospel, Mark gives us the clearest and simplest account of Jesus' life. He gives us maximum detail in his vivid descriptions of what that Jesus did but the minimum of embroidery. There is very little comment, explanation or interpretation. What you get is Jesus, pure and simple, what he was like and what he did. We are blessed to have such a vivid, straightforward - at times intimate - account of a man who lived 2000 years ago. When you read Mark, you meet Jesus.

But we need more. There's a theory, which I find quite persuasive, that Mark's material in fact came from St Peter. The text tells us of the man that Peter knew personally. But it is a bit thin on his teaching. Maybe Peter wasn't a very good listener!

We need Matthew and Luke who both give us lots of the teaching of Jesus - some described in both gospels, but also some that only Matthew or Luke knew. Matthew gives us Jesus' Jewish context. He looks back to Jesus' Jewish background and shows us how Jesus is the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy, while at the same time also challenging many of the Jewish traditions. On the other hand, as the only gentile, non-Jewish writer in the Bible, Luke looks forward, showing us how the coming of Jesus brought about the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. In his gospel sequel - Acts of the Apostles, Luke Part 2, "What happened next" - Luke shows how the Holy Spirit launched, energised and guided the early church.

The gospels are vital, the fundamental place to start but I don't think they're the place to finish. Apart from Acts and the brief resurrection stories at the end of the gospels, what the gospels tell us about is the earthly life of Jesus. But we don't live in that time. The person we encounter in our lives is not Jesus in his earthly life. The person we meet is the crucified, risen and ascended Jesus. I say this with care because there's a slight difference. Of course, it is the same Jesus, the same person. We cannot emphasise that too much. And yet, meeting Jesus in his earthly life in the gospels, and meeting the crucified, risen ascended Jesus, the Jesus who said "Lo I am with you always to the end of the age" is not quite the same.

And that's why we need the epistles. Sometimes we may feel a bit unsure about the epistles. And some of us are not sure if we like St Paul. Well he certainly was a complex character! But the point about the epistles is that they are all about meeting with the crucified, risen and ascended Lord Jesus, and about what he means to us, and what he means for our muddled world and for its uncertain future. This is vital. We need the epistles to grow in our relationship with the crucified, risen Lord Jesus, and to understand what difference he makes to us, to our world and to its future.

Recently I've begun to think this maybe what St John's gospel is about. It's one of the Bible's puzzles that St John's gospel is so different from the other three. I'm being speculative but I've started to think that maybe what we are seeing in John's Gospel is the crucified, risen and ascended Lord Jesus projected back onto his earthly life. While John's gospel is different from the others, in another way, it's strangely familiar. Because maybe the person we're meeting in John's Gospel is the crucified, risen and ascended Lord Jesus who we know today in our lives and in our worship.

So maybe John's gospel, above all others, is where we can get to know the crucified, risen and ascended Lord Jesus, who is the Jesus that is with us today in 2019. That is why, while I used to neglect John's gospel, I now read it most of all the gospels and value it very highly.

So we need all four gospels, and the epistles too. But what about that most difficult book, Revelation? A book that has the most beautiful visions of hope, but also passages that are hard to swallow, and things we find quite horrifying? Context is vital here. This is a book for Christians who are being persecuted – who are facing torture and death for their faith. And the Romans could be pretty imaginative when it came to thinking up some particularly nasty forms of torture. When you're up against that, you need some pretty strong stuff to get through. A faith that was like lukewarm weak milky tea wouldn't hack it. You need something more like hot strong coffee with brandy in the bottom. And that is what Revelation is like. When I read Revelation, I am just grateful that persecutions like that have never come near to me or to anyone close to me. But that helps me to understand what Revelation is about. Yes this is fiery Christianity. But when you're going through a fiery ordeal, that may be the only thing that quite hits the spot.

But what about the Old Testament? Here are a whole lot more questions! The early Christian writer Marcion thought he would deal with this decisively by jettisoning the Old Testament altogether. But his followers found it wasn't that simple. It just won't come away cleanly. It's a bit like Brexit and taking the United Kingdom out of Europe. What we're finding is it's not that straightforward. It just won't come away cleanly.

So let's be more positive about the Old Testament. The Old Testament was Jesus' Bible – his scriptures. He quotes from the Old Testament all the time. The Old Testament gives him the language and the concepts to talk about his ministry, his vision, and even about God himself. Our Gospel today is a good example of this. When Jesus announces his mission statement, he uses an Old Testament prophecy – Isaiah 61. We cannot understand Jesus, without his own scriptures he was so deeply rooted in.

But we are entitled to be discerning in our use of the Old Testament. Jesus had his own favourite scriptures like Isaiah, Hosea, Deuteronomy. Some parts of the Old Testament he never quotes from at all. Even in the passage he quotes from in our gospel today, Isaiah 61, he stops halfway through v.2, omitting the line about vengeance. It seems to me that Jesus, through his life and teaching, gives us a lens with which to read and understand the Old Testament - in the light of the life and teaching of Jesus.

We need the whole Bible, to give us the context, landscape and map, with which to understand Jesus and what his coming means for us and for our world. In conclusion, I want to say three things about the Bible.

First, I'm struck by the Bible's diversity. Instead of one gospel to give us a clear and simple picture, we have four. We have Matthew, Mark and Luke, then John's Gospel, then Paul – three very different viewpoints to understand Jesus. And maybe that shouldn't surprise us. How could one account, one viewpoint ever do justice to the greatness of God, and the amazing richness and depth of the message of Jesus? This helps me to understand why there is such diversity in the church. Catholic, liberal, evangelical, charismatic – all different viewpoints, but all authentically Christian, reflecting perhaps the great diversity we see in scripture. Our temptation is to divide ourselves into different camps and never actually meet each other. I think it's great when our traditions get muddled up and we find ourselves talking and listening to, and learning from each other.

Second, I'm always struck by the authenticity of the Bible. Nobody has tidied it up. The Bible gives us human life in the raw, **not** a sanitised view of life. Real life, real people who are often not that saintly, but who believe in God and who struggle to find God and meaning in the messiness of their lives. This can be an encouragement, when our lives are messy, to be authentic in our faith and our relationship with God.

Last, this is a passionate book. Jesus was a passionate man who used outrageous exaggeration to get his points across. A man who wants to shake us out of our complacency so we can discover real living. And yet a man of very deep compassion, who felt it in his guts when he saw people suffering, and who longs to liberate us from all that binds us and oppresses us so we can find real peace. St Paul was a passionate man. The Old Testament prophets that Jesus quotes from were passionate men. The picture of God they all give is of a passionate God, passionate about justice, passionate in his concern for the vulnerable, passionate about healing his wounded Creation, a God who will never impose his love on us, yet longs to welcome us all home into his arms of love.

Amen