

Jesus, the Bible and authority ...

30/7/17

I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

You may recall that at evensong last month I spoke about how Rudolf Bultmann changed theology forever by introducing the idea of demythologisation as a way of taking the myth out of the Gospels in order to source the kerygmatic vitality that represents the spiritual truth of God.

I also mentioned, as part of theological training at a university level, the idea of the Historico-critical method, which is an umbrella term used to name all of the various disciplines in studying the Bible. I was asked after evensong last month, to explain a little more about the Historico-critical method. This I am happy to do, but first I need to spend some time, in preparation, looking at the authority of the Bible, for it is in how we understand the authority of the Bible, that allows us to study it using various disciplines. So, this evening we will focus on the idea of authority and next month we will endeavour to spend a little time unpacking the concept of the Historico-critical method.

Many Christians, perhaps as a sign of spiritual loyalty or being ill-informed, choose to accept the Bible at its face value. This is called taking the Bible literally. Most Christian fundamentalists will have their theology and doctrine underpinned with the faith premise that the Bible cannot and should not ever be questioned. For fundamentalist Christians and perhaps you struggle with this too, the Bible is seen as the holy work of God, inspired by God and even written by the hand of God. Therefore, if God has written the Bible, who then is mere humankind to question the holy text, for surely all text is divine?

If a Christian has a fundamentalist approach to the Bible, they will feel very uncomfortable with the Historico-critical method, whose main purpose is to question everything in the Bible, through the skill of applying various disciplines.

This remains a sensitive topic for many Christians, but it is a conversation worth having, for if we are to grow as Christians, we need to be able to study and understand how the Bible came about.

So, if we are a fundamentalist Christian, then we believe the Bible to be infallible and therefore having ultimate authority that humankind can never question.

If one is to take this approach, where the text is to be believed at all costs, then we sit with many anomalies that become difficult to explain.

For example:

If Adam and Eve were the first man and woman on Earth and they had two sons, who did their sons marry?

If the world around us is only around 5000 years old, as claimed by some fundamentalists, then how do we explain the fossilised bones of dinosaurs which are millions of years old?

How do we explain Adam and Eve if we consider the evolution trail?

These are just three of the dilemmas that one would face if the Bible was to be taken literally.

Some other factors need to be taken into account as well if we are to fully appreciate how the Bible came about:

- 1) Firstly, the Old Testament was written over a very long period. It essentially tells the story of the Jewish people and their interaction with God. What we need to understand very carefully about the Old Testament, and the New Testament to a degree, is that while the Biblical authors were inspired by God and the Holy Spirit to write and document their sagas, they were, essentially writing for a reason. This we call the "original intended sense" of the biblical authors. The authors were writing, through God, to give hope, discipline, call to worship etc. If we are to really appreciate the spiritual truth of the Bible, we need to appreciate the original social, political and economic context the specific book was written in.

- 2) Secondly, because the Bible was written and passed down over so many years, it was often changed or adapted to suit the changing environment and needs of the people. This way, the Biblical authors could keep the Bible relevant and applicable to the current situation. If we are to appreciate the real spiritual truth of the Bible, then we need to understand how, when and where these changes came about.
- 3) Thirdly, the Bible as we know it today was a decision taken by human beings who ultimately decided which books would be included in the Bible, and which books should not. The books that were excluded became part of the Apocrypha. These are human beings making these decisions, yes, they are guided by the Holy Spirit, but they are still fallible humans.
- 4) Fourthly, the English Bibles that we have today, including all of the various versions, are all translations from the original Hebrew and Greek texts. I have studied a little Biblical Greek myself and the one thing I did learn is that very seldom there is a straight forward translation. Modern Greek is different from Hellenistic Greek and there are texts in the Greek New Testament where we translate them to the best of our ability, but we are seldom 100% sure of the original intended sense. To be sure, we need to apply various disciplines to assist us to gain the full meaning of the original text.

So, from all of this it starts to become clear that as educated and intellectual people of the 21st Century, we are called to accept that the Bible is a wonderful record of God's interactions with His people through the ages, culminating in the story of Jesus. While we are called to respect, study and appreciate the wisdom, love and sagas told in the Bible, God does not expect us to accept the texts blindly. We are called as responsible Christians to study the Word, spend time in prayer asking God to reveal His truth to us so that we can be sure of what we are called to do. The Bible does indeed have authority for us, but not in the dominant, literal acceptance way, rather in way that defines us as responsible and engaged Christians who use the Bible as a way to enrich our own lives in the faith as we reflect upon how God has honoured those in the past. That is the authority that we should be giving to the Bible. It is fallible, it is not perfect, but it is still the

ultimate record of God engaging with His people over the eons and this is what we need to remember when we read from the Holy Book.

I am reminded of the text in 2 Timothy 3:16, which says:

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,”

The text does not say the Bible is perfect, or HAS to be used for all teaching. The text says it is useful for teaching.

Accepting the Bible as fallible does not mean that it does not have authority in our lives, it merely opens a door for us as thinking Christians to delve a little deeper into the story so that, ultimately, we can grow closer to God and the truth.

Next month we will have a closer look at how we attain the original intended sense of the authors via the Historico-critical method.

May God bless you this week as you reflect upon these challenging words.

Amen.