

Jesus, the Bible and the Historico-Critical Method ...

20/8/17

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 indeed recall that last month at Evensong we discussed the idea of the authority of the Bible in our lives. Just to recap, we acknowledged the difference between a fundamentalist approach, which would argue that all Biblical text is divine and therefore beyond question; as opposed to the notion that the Bible is fallible and therefore in order for us as Christians, to fully appreciate the message that the Bible has for us, we need to understand the original intended sense of the Biblical authors. (I would encourage you to look up this sermon on the St Paul's website if you missed it last month, as this was a crucial foundation to what we are discussing tonight)

So, if we are in a frame of mind where we are comfortable to question the Bible in order to learn more about the engagement of God with His people over the eons, then we are open to the Historico-Critical Method way of thinking and discipline. This is an umbrella term used by lay people to name the various academic disciplines that have evolved since the Renaissance to assist in the understanding of the Bible. The Historico-Critical Method or Historical-Critical Method should not be seen as a criticism in the negative sense, but rather a discipline that has a positive and constructive approach to wanting to understand the Word of God in a deeper and more meaningful way.

It is not my intention, this evening, to give an academic lecture on the various disciplines within the Historico-Critical Method, but to rather create an awareness and to open up a discussion around a topic that is often avoided. It may indeed be suggested that many priests ordained today, sadly, no longer have the intense academic training that was once required in the past. Therefore, it follows that many priests find themselves ill-equipped when it comes to applying their own exegesis and hermeneutics.

What does this mean?

When a priest, deacon or lay minister prepares a sermon, traditionally they would be required to do their own exegesis of the Biblical text. This would mean studying the text in the original language that the text was written in, doing their own translation and then applying the various disciplines of the Historico-Critical Method in order to facilitate a deeper understanding of the text. The licensed clergy would then proceed to present their understanding of the text to the parishioners. This process would be encapsulated in their hermeneutics: i.e. the principals and values transmitted in the sermon.

Most clergy today rely on academic books or articles that have already applied the Historico-Critical Method for them. Thus it follows that more often than not, theological studies of the various books of the Bible are written by highly trained academics who have the time, skills and training to provide the research and background needed by you and I.

What is important to note here is that this material is also available to the person in the pew if you are interested. It is not a big secret hidden from the faithful. In fact, I would argue that informative books written to help you and I understand the Bible better, should be made more freely available to everyone who wishes to grow in their faith and understanding of the Bible.

Perhaps it would be interesting to mention just a few of the academic disciplines applied in the Historico-Critical Method:

First, we need to keep in mind that the most fundamental question of Historical-Critical exegesis is made up of the following parts:

- a) When was the story first told?
- b) What sort of function did this kind of story fulfil at the time in that particular kind of society?
- c) Does the story form a unity? If so, has it always formed a unity? If not, what is the origin of each of the component stories and what was its original function?
- d) What, at various stages of its growth, did the text mean to the people in the past? (Whether any of those meanings still holds good for people in modern

times is a different kind of question. Questions of this latter kind are entrusted to our hermeneutics)

With the above questions in mind, some of the disciplines found under the umbrella of the Historico-Critical Method are:

- 1) Textual Criticism: This is the study of the transmission of the text, not the content.
- 2) Source Criticism: Here the word “source” refers to written texts used by ancient authors, for example, the J and P texts are used as sources for the Book of Genesis. Interestingly, with regards to the New Testament, the Gospel of Mark is used as the main source by the authors of Luke and Matthew.
- 3) Form Criticism: Here academics wish to consider the oral tradition that often underlies the Biblical traditions. Form Criticism has been instrumental in assisting our understanding of the Psalms, Prophets and Synoptic Gospels.
- 4) Redaction Criticism: This is also known as Editorial Criticism. Here the aim is find out what changes were made to the various texts, as well as for what reason.

These are just a few of the various disciplines applied by skilled theologians in their quest to understand the story of the Bible in a deeper and more meaningful way.

Some responses in conclusion:

Ultimately, whether we choose to accept the Biblical text literally or to apply exegesis, we should always treat the Bible with respect and love. The Biblical texts should always be given space, through the Holy Spirit, to speak for themselves, into our lives. Remember, the Bible is the story of God engaging with His people over the ages. There is love, passion, suffering and all that goes with the story of humanity and their God over the ages. There will always be a

kerygmatic vitality (spiritual truth) in the Bible that will speak into our lives if we remain open to the spirit and faithful to God.

Being an informed and responsible Christian in the 21st Century would imply being aware, if not fully informed, of the various strategies employed by academics around the world in order to reveal the true and real history of the Bible in an exciting and original way that will empower our walk in faith together.

Thanks to the greatest minds over the ages since the Post-Renaissance, we are able to better understand, more than ever before, the faithful interaction of God with His people over the eons. There has never been a more exciting and dynamic time to be alive, as many of the wonderful layers of the Biblical stories and traditions are unpacked for our benefit. We only have to open our minds, read and pray.

May God bless you this week ahead as you continue to discover the wonder and promises of God through the gift of the Bible.

Amen.