

## **Bible Sunday 2013 – Embracing the Strangeness of Scripture**

Genesis 32:22-32; Luke 15:11-24

Today we are celebrating Bible Sunday, and to mark the occasion we have bought a new set of pew bibles. These are better printed and laid out, with helps and a more accessible translation than those we have been using until now. Historically Christians, like Jews, have been known as “people of the book”. It seems to me we have lost sight of this as a church. In future, then, I hope to make more use of these as we cultivate a culture of scripture centred worship and teaching in our common life.

### **The Bible – disputed ground**

This, of course, will not be without attendant issues. If there was a theme song for our church it might be Otis Rush’s, *I Can’t Quit Ya Baby*. In the introduction to his book *Scripture and the Authority of God*, NT Wright notes: “... the church clearly can’t live without the Bible but doesn’t seem to have much idea of how to live with it either.

Almost all Christian churches have something in their formularies about how important the Bible is. Almost all of them have devised ways, some subtle, some less so, of ostentatiously highlighting some parts of the Bible and quietly setting aside other parts...

In particular the question of how the Bible can be “authoritative” has echoed through a thousand recent debates in the life of the worldwide church. We have only to mention the question of sexual ethics to see at once to see how important, and yet how difficult, the question of Biblical authority can be. We have only to think of the so called “Jesus Wars” in North America to see how much controversy can still be generated by the question of whether the four Gospels in the New Testament are in any sense reliable as presentations of who Jesus was and how he died.”<sup>1</sup> And that’s only two examples from the New Testament. This says nothing of the misogyny, violence and ethnocentrism many see lying at the heart of the Old Testament.

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<sup>1</sup> NT Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: how to read the Bible today*, SPCK, 2005.

Yet, despite all this, personally, my confidence in and passion for God's word written has only grown over the years. As part of preparing for this sermon, I re-read an earlier one I delivered in 2008. It's a fairly gung-ho presentation which reads a bit like a manifesto. If anything, five years on, I'd probably restate my view of the veracity and empowering relevance of scripture even more strongly. Rather than repeat myself today, though, I've stuck a revised version of that sermon on the parish web site and left a few copies at the door for those of you who prefer print. Can I urge you to read this, especially as background to our upcoming discussion as a parish around sexuality issues.

### **A way through**

Today, though, I want to talk just briefly about one aspect of how the bible *functions* in our life together. In particular, picking up on Leonard Boccock's reference last week to the story of Jacob's wrestling with the man from God, I want to explore the *strangeness* of the bible and why *wrestling* with this is so necessary for knowing God – and ourselves...

In his very simple yet, I think, profound essay *Spirituality and the Word of God*,<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Leech proposes three metaphors for how the bible needs to work in our lives. He talks about:

- Brooding
- Wrestling
- Weeding

### **Brooding**

Many people have views about the bible but not many read it in a committed kind of way. How many of us know what's in the bible?

By "brooding" Leech means using different ways and means to let the words of scripture "soak" into us, to become part of us, such that not just the content of the bible but the very cadences of scripture become both the categories in which we think and the way in which we express ourselves.

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Leech, *Spirituality and Pastoral Care*, Sheldon Press, 1987, Ch.1. Spirituality and the Word of God.

## **Wrestling**

In discussing “wrestling” with scripture, Leech takes the image of the story of Jacob which we heard again today. He notes two aspects of the story:

“First, at the end of the exhausting encounter, Jacob emerges *wounded* – wrestling has some *risk* attached to it. When God does speak we may not always like what we hear. It can be *challenging*, even dangerous – it can strike to the core of who we are, calling our beliefs, motivations and actions radically into question.

Secondly, Jacob emerges still not knowing the name of the man – that is, his identity. God meets with Jacob, but despite the lengthy tussle, God does not tell Jacob what he is demanding to know. There remains a sense of mystery and incompleteness.

Likewise, in the encounter between the Word of God and the dilemmas and perplexities of our day, there is no straightforward question and answer process. We cannot, for example, jump directly from the rules regarding the year of jubilee in Leviticus 25 to the problems of international debt and land tenure. The link is there, but it is not that simple. There are no easy congruencies.

Applying scripture involves allowing its truth to enter into *dialogue*, *struggle* and *conflict* with our contemporary experience. Insight comes not necessarily by *direct* application but in and through the *conflict*.”<sup>3</sup>

I want to come back to this in a moment because it relates directly to Leech’s last metaphor of “weeding” and the take home point I want offer today...

## **Weeding**

Leech notes that none of us come to scripture without baggage. We all bring assumptions, predispositions, interests and vested interests to our reading. The meanings we extract from our reading are coloured by the dominant culture, class or society from which we read.

For instance, while many Western readers of scripture seem to read the bible

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p.14. paraphrased and expanded.

individualistically as a kind of reference book that can help us with our psychological hang ups, third-world readers read it very much in terms of themes around exodus and liberation – release from poverty and oppression and the coming of God’s reign of justice upon the earth.

[e.g. Destiny Church]

“It is essential, therefore, as we seek to listen to God through scripture, to disentangle the message of the Gospel from the accumulation of cultural baggage with which it has been covered.”<sup>4</sup>

To achieve this, Leech argues for a “process of purification involving *prayer*, *critical reflection* and *corporate debate*... tireless weeding which seeks to remove all obstacles”<sup>5</sup> between us and hearing what God is saying.

Church, then, becomes a centre not for pious retreat but of “ruthless persistence and struggle, a forum in which there can be open debate and struggle around the great issues of our day in the light of scripture...”<sup>6</sup> and scripture becomes not a collection of comforting “spiritual” platitudes, but the living word of God calling us to *engage* with a world that urgently needs to know of God’s saving grace.

### **The strangeness of scripture**

It seems to me, that the *strangeness* of scripture, is key in this.

I was struck in that very familiar story of the prodigal son we heard earlier from Luke’s Gospel, with that phrase at the very centre of the story – the turning point where Jesus tells us that the man “*came to himself*”.<sup>7</sup> For the man, it was the squalor and degradation of his life that bought him to see the truth about himself and his situation and from there to *act* – to humble himself and seek reconciliation with his father.

It seems to me that scripture has this same function in our common life as God’s people. We can try and “weed” all we like. We can try and analyse our context and jettison the baggage that weighs us down and skews our hearing of what

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid p.15.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Adapted.

<sup>7</sup> Lk.15:17.

God is saying to us, but how do we know the difference between the plants and the weeds? It's not always that easy.

[e.g. is puha a weed or a vegetable – Kinohaku?]

When we rub-up against the bits of scripture we don't like, the bits that run counter to our expectations of who God *must be*, how God *must act*, how life *should work*; when we find parts of scripture that celebrate vengeance and recount murder, rape and slavery as part of God's plan – right alongside other passages that point in the opposite direction to passivism, service, altruistic love and so on – if we have any heart for the things of God at all, we are forced to struggle (either that or we do as the Liturgy Commission did when compiling the psalms in our Prayer Book – we just leave those bits out.)<sup>8</sup> ☺

[Look up Ps.137 in NZPB]

It's the strangeness, even the offensiveness, of scripture that throws into sharp relief the assumptions we bring when imagining our God and challenges us not to imagine this God idolatrously in our own image.

When we develop an *openness* to wrestling with *all* of scripture – including and even especially those bits that we find difficult. It is then that scripture is becoming God's Word for us, then that God is able to touch us – even if we are wounded in the process.

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<sup>8</sup> Psalm 137 7-9 c.f. NZPB 362.