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The word of the Lord

Leader article

The Scriptures are a gift

It is crucial that we receive the Scriptures as a gift from God. They are the primary means of the divine revelation that the Church has received through the Holy Spirit, and in them we are given insight into the wisdom of God, the fallenness of man, and the way to salvation through God's Messiah that would be impossible to discern only by means of human reason or empirical observation. This is why they are a *gift* – a lifeline thrown to us amid the confusion and distractions of this life. As such, the Scriptures must be treated with reverence and approached with humility. There are many things in the Bible that are challenging or go against the grain of modern sensibilities, but we should always be mindful that we never sit in judgement over the word of God, but beneath it, seeking to discern God's will and purpose through the Scriptures, and trusting that, in the words of Article VI in the Book of Common Prayer, they 'containeth all things necessary to salvation'. Therefore, in approaching the Bible, our first principle should not be what we think of any particular passage, but what God is telling his Church through it.

Composition

The Christian order of the books of the Old Testament and its position before the New Testament has given us an unequivocal emphasis on the development of unfolding history, leading up to the coming of Christ. As salvation history, it is a big part of our Christian self-understanding.

However, the Bible is made up of a variety of genres with a number of different emphases. Most certainly there is history, such as the history of the reigns of the kings of Israel from Saul to David, all the way to Zedekiah. There is also poetry, such as in the psalms; prophecy in the writings of Amos, Isaiah and others; and wisdom literature, such as the book of Proverbs. However, running through all these different types of literature is a theological message that should be our prime focus. In other words, whether we are reading history, prophecy or poetry, we should be discerning God's truth in all of them. For example, there have been many arguments over the historical accuracy of the book of Genesis. Was the world created in six 24-hour periods? Did early human beings really live to the great ages that Genesis describes? Though these are interesting questions, they are not what is most important about Genesis – it is the *theological* message that should concern us. The important teaching of Genesis is very simple: God made the world and it was good. The first human beings had a perfect relationship with God. This relationship was broken through human rebellion against God – sin. Human beings from then on try to repair that broken relationship, but fail because they always slip back into sin. The relationship can only be healed by God on his terms,

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and we are given glimpses of what this future reconciliation might look like. If we understand that, we understand Genesis – it is the story of man’s fall from grace and our need to be reconciled to God. It is fundamental to understanding the Christian faith, and far more important than stale debates about the definition of days or years. This is how we should approach the whole Bible – what is it telling us about God, humanity and our relationship?

Scripture is always in the present

Despite their antiquity, the Scriptures always speak to us personally in the here and now. However, for us to get a proper understanding of what they are saying to us, we must ask some basic questions of any given book of the Bible: who wrote it? Who was the intended audience? What is the historical, political or social context of the book? And, perhaps most importantly, what was the author’s purpose? Get this right and we will be able to apply its teaching successfully to our own day and age.

For example, Luke’s Gospel was written specifically for a man named Theophilus, in order that he may have ‘certainty concerning the things [he had] been taught’ (1.4, ESV). Luke was not one of the twelve disciples, and never personally met Jesus, but was a follower of St Paul. Perhaps because of that, and being an educated man (he was a doctor), he clearly states how he sets out interviewing those who *had* witnessed the events of Jesus’ life in order to give an ‘orderly account’ (v. 3). Accuracy was therefore clearly a very important criteria for Luke, with the purpose of giving

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confidence to a fellow Christian of the truths of the gospel. This should inform the way we engage with his writings.

Humility and an open mind

In the Old Testament in particular, we encounter things that seem curious or odd. Rules about mixed cloth and a prohibition on shellfish are ripe for sceptics to mock. However, as Christians sitting under God's word, we should not dismiss what is contained in Scripture, but humbly and with an open mind ask 'why?' The laborious rules of the old covenant serve a function: to highlight that Israel is a people set apart by God who therefore live according to a distinct code, but also as a people under judgement on account of the Fall. The Mosaic law might seem strange in parts, but as a whole it serves to delineate the terms on which the people of God may approach him and worship him and live under him until such a time as a saviour comes to deal with the problem of sin and, therefore, eliminate the need for the law.

So, again, we must look beneath the surface and try to draw out the theological implications of what Scripture says. All the Old Testament points to Christ, and we must keep that at the forefront of our minds when we engage with it.

Questions

1 What do you hope to receive from reading the Scriptures?

Note the word 'you' – do not worry about other people; and also the word 'do' – there is no ought.

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We certainly want participants to give a positive answer to this question, to share their desire to read the texts. Hearing the Scriptures in church and having them expounded by a preacher is communal but largely passive.

To read the Scriptures is to receive something. First suggestions are most likely to be about personal help, support or encouragement. A second stage might well be a fascination with the facts behind a text. Different things interest different people.

My own detail, when a teenager, was being told about Zebedee's Jerusalem Fish Shop. How was John known to the high priest (John 19.16)? Because his father had a fish business, from Galilee to the capital. Nonsense? No matter, it was a vision of treasures hidden behind the immediate words.

What you are seeking is to bring people closer to the realization that all Scripture speaks to us of our Lord. Consider Psalm 69 (someone might read it aloud). And ask this question, 'Why did all four Evangelists tell us that they gave Jesus sour wine as he hung on the cross?' It seems so trivial a detail in such sparse accounts. Now imagine the early Christians' awe and excitement as they recited verse 21, 'they gave me sour wine to drink' (Psalm 69.21, ESV). The Scriptures spoke to them of Jesus. It's a style of reasoning almost incomprehensible to us, and yet strangely moving.

Psalm 1.1 begins the whole collection with the words, 'Blessed is the man.' Who is this man? Is it not 'the Son of Man' (Psalm 8.4)? The oldest interpretation of this, so early that it is found even in the books of the New Testament, is that it refers to Christ.

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There are many examples of these allusions to Jesus in the pages of the Old Testament. As Jesus himself said, ‘As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up’ (John 3.14, ESV). Or consider the story of the sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22), where God provides a ram ‘caught in a thicket by his horns’ to die in Isaac’s place (v. 13, ESV) – the allusion to Jesus dying for others with the crown of thorns on his head is unmistakable.

We may also look for what one might call pre-echoes of the Incarnation in the Old Testament. The Ten Commandments were the words of God made stone, present among us here on earth, the revelation of who he is. Placed in the ark of the covenant in the Temple in Jerusalem, they were a prefiguring of Christ’s full Incarnation in the womb of the Virgin Mary, amid the people of Israel.

Do I over-stress the Old Testament? If people can glimpse the truth that even these ancient, sometimes alien texts can show us the Lord Jesus, then all of Scripture becomes truly ‘the word of the Lord’, and all can say ‘thanks be to God’, and hunger to read more.

2 What passage of the Bible have you found most helpful or most difficult?

As mentioned already, reading the Bible is demanding: finding excuses for not reading parts of it comes all too easily.

Offended by the slavery? This institution of the ancient world is complex and cannot be ignored, but dominated as our contemporary imagination is by the American form, it would be difficult to engage in a sufficiently full discussion.

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The book of Numbers? It's worth asking, gently, if the apparent harshness of the edicts of a group of people struggling to remain faithful in the hostile environment of 3,500 years ago is really so great a cause of offence to someone in the comfort of the twenty-first century. Again, and always, tease out the theological message behind the apparently strange passages.

It's important not to allow the session to become a listing of likes and dislikes. If participants are unable to go deeper into the texts and why they cause the reaction they do, it may help to seek some unifying themes. And if some do not suggest themselves, here are two that may help.

The Hebrew word *yadah* occurs frequently in many of the Old Testament books, but especially frequently in the Psalms. Translated either as 'praise' or 'confess', it is (importantly) both. To acknowledge the greatness of God is to be drawn to confess our own sin and unworthiness as measured against his infinite holiness and purity. To acknowledge our faults and disobedience is to be drawn to praise God and his laws.

It is safe to say that there is no passage dealing with sin in either Testament that does not lead on to the justice and mercy of God. This is especially evident in the Prophets, where condemnation of sin nearly always precedes the knowledge of what is right and good.

In Hosea, for example, the condemnation of adultery comes first, and the exhortation to love God, because he loves us, comes afterwards. It is a strange but powerful message of the Scriptures that condemnation can be good for us.

3 How do you understand the power of the words of the Bible?

If reading the Scriptures is hard and demanding work, there must be something in those difficult words by way of justification or reward. Which, of course, there is. These are no ordinary words, neither in Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek nor in English. They are imbued, by the Holy Spirit, with the presence of Christ. The Word is, figuratively, incarnate in his words.

Consider the charming story of Ruth. As a text, it combines fascinating elements of Semitic language and culture of the eleventh century BC, and at the same time acts as a counter to exclusivist marriage rulings in ancient Israel. It is a text of both literary worth and academic interest. But as Scripture, its themes of loyalty, powerlessness (especially for women), resourcefulness and trust take on infinite value as they are breathed by God.

Its echoes of both feminism and anti-feminism can be discussed under either dispensation; but as a source of encouragement, in loss or loneliness, it gains its power from being part of the canon, part of the Church's heritage of prayer and teaching. It is a context within which to talk to God about these challenges, precisely because it is part of the given, shared tradition.

Ruth's famous cry, 'Your people shall be my people, and your God my God' (Ruth 1.16, ESV) has a power of assurance that it could never possess if found simply in a novel. If this is true of so minor a work, how much more can it be for the greater texts, from Paul or the Evangelists.

It is a subtle idea, this power of Scripture. Consider

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Christ's miracle at the wedding feast at Cana. All who were present received fully of the new wine, but, as John tells us, only the servants knew (John 2.9). Is this not the Christian's reward? Not to receive any more of the Lord's gift than anyone else, but simply to know Christ and his power?

Culturally, we seem to have lost this sense of the presence, the authority, even the spiritual quality of God's word. This is ironic at a time when the secular world is awash with word as presence. How many scatter cushions are inscribed with the word 'love' or some improving maxim, 'Dream big', 'Believe in yourself'?

It would be surprising if no one were to respond to this truth, that the words of Scripture have power, that they are not simply informative, but more importantly performative (Isaiah 55.10–11). But if no one does, come back to the Mass, to the words of institution, of course, but also to our understanding of what happens when the Gospel is read. Christians must surely grasp the power of the word proclaimed within the assembled people of God. Our formal liturgical practice certainly suggests it. Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

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