

STUDYING THE BIBLE TOGETHER

INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2009 Parish & People published a Briefing containing two articles from the Church Times by the Very Rev. David Edwards, former Dean of Southwark. In these two articles he challenged the Church of England to take the study of the Bible seriously.

We are faced with many problems in which Christians of different traditions find themselves publicly opposing each other. We need to learn to listen to each other properly and take the trouble to study the scriptures in conjunction with those who disagree with us.

With this in mind David recommended that this study of the scriptures could profitably take place at Deanery level, as this is the unit where Christians of different church backgrounds find themselves meeting together.

Three diocesan bishops have now expressed the desire to run a pilot project in their diocese. Parish and People as an organization concerned with the ways deaneries work has agreed to produce suitable material for deaneries to use, which we hope will be available later on this year.

With this project in mind we have compiled this Briefing to try to understand some of the important matters we need to face up to when Christians from different traditions *Study the Bible Together*.

There are three sections

- **Bible Study with the Bishop** - by the Bishop of Bolton.
- **Lessons from Northern Ireland** - by John Cole
- **Hope through the Scriptures** - by Prof Keith Ward

No attempt has been made to "reconcile" different opinions in these articles. We all come with our own ideas, and it is through our differences we may be able to hear what God is trying to say to us.

Jimmy Hamilton-Brown

BIBLE STUDY WITH THE BISHOP

How the Bishop of Bolton has brought his deanery clergy together round the Bible.

My pattern is to invite clergy, usually from 2 different deaneries, to come to my house for 2 hours. We have some worship and sharing, and in that context engage in Bible Study together. I take the lead in this, but obviously given the wisdom and experience around the room, encourage reflection and sharing.

As far as the content is concerned, what I have done so far is to take one of the lectionary readings that is coming up over the next few weeks, and that is the basis for our study. I make the point that our coming together is for our own benefit and growth, but that hopefully our shared reflections will feed into the preparations that the clergy will be making for their own preaching when that particular reading occurs.

I have to say that there has been an overwhelmingly positive response both to the idea of doing this, and in people's comments and evaluation following the experience. It is not uncommon for every member of the chapter to be present, and those who have not been able to attend, being clear that they are very sorry to have to send apologies, and hope that this opportunity for shared Bible Study will be something that will be continued in the future.

It goes without saying that the clergy come from every possible tradition within the Church of England, and have shown a remarkable openness to one and other in the context of these gatherings.

From my point of view, all this is part of trying to make the Deanery itself a more effective unit for ministry and mission.

Aware as I am that clergy morale can be quite battered at times, I see coming together like this as well as other opportunities, has been one way of not only myself as Bishop addressing this, but also helping clergy to be more confident in supporting and being open with one and other.

Looking ahead, next year my plan is to do the same kind of thing, but rather than people coming to my house, the Archdeacons and I are going to spend a whole day in a particular Deanery. Our time together will begin with a couple of hours in the context of worship - Eucharistic or otherwise - and then he or I will engage with the clergy once more in Bible Study, but as it were on their own patch.

I am aware of at least three other Bishops who are doing something similar to this. They are the Bishops of Derby, Swindon and Crediton. I feel sure that there will be others amongst my Episcopal colleagues but they are three with whom I have had valuable conversations who have been helpful to me in developing the pattern as outlined above.

+Christopher Bolton

FOOTNOTE: Parish and People would encourage the bishops to consider how lay people from the deaneries could also be involved in these Bible studies!

LESSONS FROM NORTHERN IRELAND

An invitation to discover what it means to be a member of a 'community of reconciliation' ¹

Reading the Bible is a dangerous business

Christians in Northern Ireland know more than most that reading the Bible together is dangerous - especially when those taking part come from different traditions within the Christian Church or from different social backgrounds. The four hundred year old rift between 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' has become thoroughly entangled with the political divisions between Unionists and Republicans. Attempting any shared study of the Bible is then a major challenge. But out of this challenge have come some important insights.

The first key insight is that the dangers lie not in the Bible, but in the minds of every participant. None of us hears the message from the Scriptures as a solitary individual. Still less is the true and complete meaning of God's Word self-evidently revealed to me for all time without reference to anyone else. (See II Pet 1 20)

We each understand what we read in particular ways because of our experience of life. We express our faith in the language of the community with whom we worship. Whether we notice it or not, we each read the Bible as a member of a community - a community which has its own shared memories, its own cultural norms, its own habitual way of expressing its grasp of God's truth.

¹ A first-class resource is the work-book "Communities of Reconciliation - Living faith in the public place" by Johnston McMaster and Cathy Higgins (Colourpoint Books 2002) ISBN 1 904242 04 9

The titles we use for our acts of worship illustrate how the very words we use are determined by the culture and traditions where we feel most at home. Among the many titles used for the sacrament of Holy Communion, even within the Church of England, are 'the Mass', 'the Eucharist', 'the Parish Communion' and 'The Lord's Supper.' Each title generates in our mind's eye different images of what might be happening - and before we know it, we have loaded each one with all sorts of feelings of approval or disapproval! Yet how many of us really understand what we are judging? Perhaps, before we prejudge what other people value, we ought to find out why they value it in the first place!

Here, then, is one of the ground rules when groups of Christians from different backgrounds - and this would certainly include different parishes within a deanery - meet to study the Bible together: We must learn to listen to each other and be prepared to work hard to translate what we hear. If we decline to make the effort required, the result will be at best a few pious platitudes and at worst a dialogue of the deaf - 'generating more heat than light'.

Those who have worshipped in the same church all their lives will naturally assume that in every other parish church things will be done in much the same way as in their own. The fact of *difference* amongst Christian traditions, so very apparent in Northern Ireland, may well go completely unnoticed and unacknowledged amongst the parishes of a deanery.

In your deanery, Step One: Get to know each other!

It is bad enough when churchgoers only meet each other at church services. How much harder is it for members of Deanery Synods, let alone churchgoers across the deanery, to get to know each other!

So, in your deanery, before you start any study of the Bible together, be prepared to tell the others a bit about yourself and about what you value most about belonging to your local church community.

- It might be about the quality and style of the worship - about how your faith is fed.
- It might be the things you do as a congregation or as an individual in the wider community - about how your faith is expressed.
- It might be the challenges you see your church facing - or the exciting opportunities!
- It will surely always be something more than the fact that you are among friends!

When we do start trying to express what matters most to us about our church life, the very language we use will be unfamiliar and even quite puzzling for some. So can we trust others in the group to take us seriously if we risk sharing some of our deeper feelings? Without mutual trust, we will not hear what God wants us to hear.

The challenge is to learn to listen to each other and to value others for what God is doing through them, even if the way they describe it makes us wince!

Costly messages for people in demanding situations

The second key insight reinforces the first: The Scriptures themselves were not written to be read by solitary individuals. They were written to be heard by a whole community in a particular context, which was often highly-charged and heavily politicised. The original writing and speaking of the Scriptures was often costly. We should expect our reading of them to be costly too.

In your deanery, Step Two: Get to know each other's worlds

In Step One, we got to know each other as individual disciples of Jesus Christ and as members of a local Christian community. Now we also need to understand the social context of where our fellow Christians live their lives.

Most deaneries will include a variety of urban and rural parishes - parishes where most people are reasonably *affluent* and parishes where there is significant *deprivation* and *social exclusion*. What mental images are conjured up by these words in italics?

Stories can be told in every parish about what is going on outside the churchyard gate. The stories will reveal people's hopes and fears - and how the local context is changing. It may not all be bad news!

But the question, in each of these contexts, is "What would these people recognise as genuinely 'good news'?" - 'Gospel' as opposed to the escapism and cheap grace that is represented by winning the lottery! What could you share with them and what could you say to them that might lead them to build their trust in God and discover the fulfilment and transformation in their lives that is possible through Jesus Christ?

Again it is vitally important that we each listen attentively to each other's answers - and translate as necessary!

Discovering truths you have never seen before

These first two steps are about building your confidence in the Holy Spirit and in each other. Then, when you start reading the Bible together, you will appreciate how other people interpret what they are reading.

Instead of feeling threatened by someone else's interpretation, you will feel enriched by it. Together you will be able to combine your insights and, most likely, be led by the Spirit to new understandings - things none of you has seen before.

In your deanery, Step Three: Studying the Bible Together

As you work with a passage of scripture, make sure you consider this sequence of questions:

WHAT DID IT MEAN TO THE PEOPLE AT THE TIME? Find out what the context was when the Bible passage was first written - exploring questions about the hopes and fears of those who first heard those words - just as you did when discussing the context in your own parish. What did these words mean to those who first heard them?

WHAT DOES GOD WANT TO SAY TO US TODAY? Consider what, out of this passage from the Bible, is Word of God for our contexts and communities now. Be prepared to listen to the different perspectives from each community. There will be more than one 'right answer' - more than one 'true meaning' - all of them potentially pointers to God's truth.

WHERE IS THE HOLY SPIRIT LEADING US? At all stages, be attentive and prepared to listen to the Holy Spirit, especially when we are uncomfortable with what we hear from another context or tradition. Take time out of the discussion for the whole group to be quiet and pray - especially if the debate gets too heated! And be ready to be called into action - into new ways of fulfilling our calling as disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ.

HOW CAN WE RESPOND? Responding practically to the Spirit's call - even perhaps daring to develop some new piece of work together for the sake of the Kingdom - will then change all our experiences. It may even, by God's hand, change our context - requiring us to come back together to look at the Scriptures again, and be shown yet more new insights into God's truth.

Learning a Relational Discipleship

In the Briefing "*Church Without Price?*" (2009 - available from www.parishandpeople.org.uk, price £1.50 post free) I argued that the Bible offers a picture of Christian discipleship that is 'relational' - in other words, it deals with how we behave towards each other as individuals or as groups within wider communities.

We need to learn the art of this relational discipleship - this pattern of gracious and grateful living. It is a style of 'living-with-others' that we can

then share with other Christian communities within the wider Church of Jesus Christ - and more widely again with other faith communities and with the rest of humankind.

Reading the Bible together in the deanery provides an opportunity to learn this demanding discipline - to learn what it means to live as 'communities of reconciliation'.

John Cole

HOPE THROUGH THE SCRIPTURES

by Professor Keith Ward

'In the beginning was the Word' (John 1:1). For Christians, the Word of God is not a written text, the Bible, but the living person of Jesus Christ. That is the definitive key to a truly Christian interpretation of the Bible. Without the Bible, we would not know what Jesus was remembered to have done and said. We would not know the Jewish context of prophetic expectation in which he lived. We would not see how human perceptions of God developed from the tribal war-god of the early Hebrew tribes to the God of unlimited love who was seen in Jesus. The Bible is an essential text for Christians, and there is something to learn from every part of it.

'All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness' (2 Timothy 3:16). But two points must be noted. First, the word 'God-breathed' (theopneustos) is not the same as 'God-dictated'. In the Book of Genesis, the spirit (the 'breath') of God swept over the waters of the formless void (Gen 1:2). And God breathed into the nostrils of the first humans 'the breath of life' (Gen 2:7). The universe at its origin, humans and indeed all animals, are God-breathed. God arouses life and order out of chaos and lifelessness. So when Scripture is God-breathed, it becomes, by the action of the Spirit, a source of life and wisdom. That does not mean that God actually dictated it, so that there are no human errors or no different points of view or no developments of understanding in the text.

The second point is that the Bible does indeed contain many different views. The Book of Job depicts the great suffering of an innocent man, while Psalm 37 says, 'I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread' (verse 25). These are very different views of the suffering of the innocent. We can only account for this difference by saying that they represent very partial human responses to life before God.

In a similar way, Psalm 6 says, 'in death there is no remembrance of you' (verse 5), while Jesus said that God 'is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive' (Luke 20:38). There is a clear development within the Bible from an early belief in Sheol, as a gloomy place of the dead, to the New Testament proclamation of resurrection to eternal life.

The idea of God, too, develops from early parts of the Bible, written in the Bronze Age, where God is one tribal God of war among others, to the teaching of second Isaiah that there is only one creator of all things, a God of justice and mercy. This idea of God is developed further again by Jesus, who teaches that the Creator is a God of unlimited love and forgiveness.

So if the Bible is read carefully, it can be seen to contain many different and partial viewpoints, and to record a development in the ideas of God and salvation that is, for Christians, completed and transformed by Jesus. It is only when the text is taken as a whole, and when Jesus is taken as the central key for interpreting it, that it becomes useful for teaching. We should not take any text in isolation. And as Christians we must interpret every text in the light of the Gospel records of Jesus.

Seen in the light of Jesus, much that we learn from the Bible is about human failures to understand God, and limitations of vision that were only slowly and perhaps never entirely overcome. If the person of Jesus healing, forgiving, reconciling, condemning religious arrogance, consorting with the poor, and calling all to the way of love is our key to interpreting the Bible, then much of the Bible stands condemned.

Slaughtering Amalekites, putting away of non Jewish wives, stoning disobedient sons to death, and praying for the murder of the children of one's enemies - all these things are to be found in the Bible, but are roundly condemned by the Sermon on the Mount.

Faith in Christ compels us to read the Bible, therefore, as a developing record of imperfect human responses to God. All Scripture is useful for

teaching. But what it often teaches is how prejudiced and short-sighted people are - a useful reminder to us that we too are prejudiced and myopic. Reading the Bible teaches us that God leads us slowly towards truth, but we resist to a quite remarkable extent.

The Bible, for Christians, is not the dictated words of God; it is the witness to the personal Word of God. Each part of it must be read in a way that points to the fulness of Christ. That is the first principle of a Christian interpretation of the Bible. The second principle follows from it. If the Bible is to be read as pointing to Christ, that means often taking it in a symbolic or spiritual, rather than a literal, sense. We can, for instance, take the command to exterminate Amalekites to point to the need for complete devotion to God and total opposition to sin. But we cannot forget that the literal sense is morally abhorrent, a command of genocide. To interpret such passages we need to be free to reject their literal sense, but also to see them as stages in developing ideas about God which are continually revised throughout the Bible and which, however perversely, point forward to a deeper understanding of God, decisively revealed in Christ, though still not fully understood by us.

So a sense of history is needed, as we read the Bible. A strong sense of metaphor, of the way in which literal images can stand for spiritual teachings, is equally important. God does not literally ride on the clouds, and God is not literally 'up' in the sky. Such physical images represent God's majesty and sovereignty. The earth is not, as Genesis supposes, a flat disc floating on a cosmic sea, with the sun, moon and stars hung from the bowl of the sky. We need a sense of poetry, to find deep spiritual meaning in these mythical and literally false symbols. The sea, for example, represents the threatening and chaotic elements of the universe, and the garden of Eden ('bliss') represents the beauty of the natural world, for which humans are responsible. It is tragic that literalist interpreters of the Bible seem to have lost this sense of symbolism, and turn the imagery of the Book of Revelation into a timetable of physical events in the near future. Throughout the Bible, historical events are used as images of eternal or spiritual truths. Of course, we can take quite a lot of historical narratives in the Bible literally though even there, the literal details are not of primary

importance. But the vital questions to ask are: what is the spiritual truth these things express?

Why did the editors of the Gospels, for example, choose just these events, describe them in just this way, and put them in just this order?

To help in answering these questions, the Gospels should always be read with the aid of a synopsis and a good commentary. Lay them alongside one another, noting the differences and similarities, and ask: what does this show us about the way the editor saw the life of Jesus? About what he thought was important, and what response Jesus was evoking in him? Comparing Mark and John, we cannot fail to see huge differences of response to one who is the same person, Jesus. In Mark, Jesus speaks in short cryptic sentences, and tells the disciples not to tell anyone that he is the Messiah. In John, Jesus speaks in long discourses, and openly declares that he is the Son of God, the light of the world. What accounts for these differences? We will quickly discover that scholars differ in their suggestions, but they all agree that the questions are inescapable. Maybe the reason for that is that we should see that there are, and always have been, different ways of seeing Jesus. They have been there from the very first, illustrated by the fact that we have four Gospels, and it is positively misleading to try to collapse the different Gospels into one literal biography. That would miss the point, which is that the Gospels record very personal responses to God as revealed in Jesus. When we see this, we can have the freedom to make our own, perhaps different, personal response. And that is what the Bible should be, a diverse, developing sets of texts that embody a personal divine address inviting us to make our own unique response, not a set of facts that we just have to accept without question.

The besetting sin of Biblical interpretation is the failure to accept that there exist many diverse interpretations of the texts. There is no 'one true' understanding, though of course some interpretations are more adequate than others. We must take our own view, but it should be an instructed view. A view of the Bible is instructed if it takes into account the range of reputable Biblical scholarship that is represented in, for example, the Oxford Bible commentary. Not everyone needs to read the

Oxford Bible Commentary, though probably if you can, it is a Christian duty to do so. Yet every Christian should have a great deal of regard for the views of those who have spent their lives studying the texts in the original languages, and who know all that patient scholarship which has accumulated in the last 200 years. I am not suggesting that the Oxford Bible Commentary has it right. I am suggesting that it gives a necessary background to forming personal views about how God reveals the divine nature and purpose in Jesus.

So in reading the Bible, we need a sense of history, of the historical contexts in which the documents were written, and of the developing history of the basic Biblical ideas of God, salvation, and revelation. We need a sense of poetry, of how literal sounding statements can convey implicit and many-sided spiritual insights into the relation of finite beings to the infinite mystery of God. We need some knowledge of modern Biblical scholarship in all its diversity, or at the very least an acceptance that such scholarship is an aid to discerning divine truth, and not an invention of the Devil. And we need above all a personal devotion to Jesus Christ, the one to whom the Bible witnesses, in many developing, imperfect, yet potentially illuminating, ways.

The Bible is a pillar of Christian faith, but it should be read in the knowledge that 'we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code' (Romans 7:6). The Bible is a written code, and without it we would have no access to the new life of the Spirit in Jesus, for we would not know what Jesus did and said. But it is the new way of the Spirit in which we live, and all written codes, including the Bible, must be judged, and sometimes found wanting, by the test of whether they point to the liberation of new life in the Spirit, or rather to the bondage of some written code, even if it is in the Bible itself, from which Christ has set us free.

Keith Ward

Professor of Divinity, Gresham College, London and Regius Professor of Divinity Emeritus, University of Oxford

For reflection and discussion

'All Scripture is God-breathed.' (2 Timothy 3.16). How do you understand this phrase in a way which makes sense for you?

Ward says that, 'Faith in Christ compels us to read the Bible ... as a developing record of imperfect human responses to God'.

Do you agree, and are there parts of scripture which offer glimpses of what perfect human responses to God might be?

How would you respond to the question, 'Are you a Bible believing Christian?'

For further reading

Keith Ward, *What the Bible Really Teaches: A Challenge to Fundamentalists*,
SPCK Publishing, ISBN 0281056803

Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*,
HarperSanFrancisco, ISBN 0060609192

Richard Holloway, *How to read the Bible*,
Granta Books, ISBN 1862078939

John Shelby Spong, *The Sins of Scripture*,
HarperOne, ISBN 0060778407

Karen Armstrong, *The Bible: The Biography*,
Atlantic Books ISBN 1843543974

The Oxford Bible Commentary by John Barton and John Muddiman, Editors,
Oxford University Press ISBN 0199277784

*Professor Keith Ward's article is reprinted with permission from
Together in Hope, editor Adrian Alker, St Mark's CRC Press Sheffield,
ISBN 978-0-9559593-0-1*