

I was 19, and about to go to University to read Theology. A kind neighbour decided to mark the occasion by giving me a suitable book, and presented me with 'The Bible designed to be read as Literature'. I have to confess that I thanked him kindly, put the book in my book-case, and have scarcely looked at it for over 70 years.

The idea behind the book, the author explained, was not to excise religion from the Bible, but to emphasize its quality as literature. The language of Tyndale's translation, which lies behind the so-called Authorized or King James' version, had an enormous influence on the development of the English language, since for centuries the Bible was the only book that many households possessed. But nowadays the format of printed Bibles, with double columns, fancy covers and gilt pages, does not encourage people to *read* it. Why would anyone want to wade through all those prohibitions in the book of Leviticus about what people should not eat or wear, or all those 'so-and-so begat so-and-so's at the beginning of St Matthew's Gospel? Cut out the boring bits and concentrate on the central story, this author believed, and people might read it.

The Bible as literature; the Bible as history – the story of Israel, and of the origins of Christianity; the Bible as myth – an account of how the world came into being and of how a nation was born; the Bible as Law – a list of instructions about how one should behave; the Bible as the Word of God – the infallible answer to all our problems. What we find in the Bible depends to a large extent on what we *expect* to find and how we approach it.

I remember a time when I was even younger than 19 – *much* younger – and was heartily singing one of the hymns in our hymnbook which began with the line ‘O Word of God Incarnate’. Since it fell in the section of hymns about ‘the Holy Scriptures’, I naturally assumed that I was addressing the Bible. It was only later that I realized that in Christian teaching the Word of God Incarnate was none other than Jesus Christ. God had, so the author of the letter to the Hebrews tells us, spoken in many different ways to his people – through prophets and others whose words are recorded in our Old Testament – but now he had spoken through his Son, whom the author of John’s Gospel describes as ‘the Word’. It is *he* who is the authentic Word of God.

And here we have one of the interesting differences between Christianity and the other two Abrahamic faiths. For Judaism, their scriptures are THE word of God – so sacred that worn-out copies must be preserved at all costs, and were carefully stored for all time in a Genizah. For Islam, it is the Koran that is sacred, and any disrespect towards it is blasphemy. But for Christians, though the scriptures are holy, their *primary* purpose is seen as pointing to THE Word of God, namely Jesus. The Bible is a *witness* to God’s Word, rather than the Word itself.

Now one of the problems with any kind of word, whether it is spoken or written, is that it is vulnerable. Examples of this crowd in on us in the news media every day. What *did* this or that minister really say? And what did they *mean* by it? Authors and lecturers are constantly reminded of how their words are misheard and misunderstood. In the days when I used to mark examination papers I was constantly amazed to read that Hooker had said or

written this or that, when of course I had done nothing of the sort. Words are vulnerable – they can be misheard, and they can be misunderstood.

Readings of scripture are often introduced with the bold words ‘This is the word of the Lord’. And we may well find ourselves wondering whether it really *is* God’s word. Sometimes we need to investigate just what is going on – which is why in our services we are invited to ‘*listen* for the Word of God’. That word may not be obvious.

Deep in the UL there is no doubt a copy of a play about Noah by the French novelist André Obey which was once popular with Dramatic Societies. It was written rather in the style of a medieval mystery play. In it, we see Noah being given instructions about how to construct the ark – so many cubits wide and long and high. But Noah was apparently somewhat deaf, and didn’t always catch what God was saying to him. We see him cupping his hand round his ear and saying ‘What was that, Lord? I didn’t quite catch that bit.’ As we read the Old Testament, we may well find ourselves wondering whether the Israelites perhaps misheard or misunderstood what God was telling them. Did he, we wonder, *really* instruct them to slaughter their enemies the Amalekites? The idea is out of tune with the command not to kill.

Passages such as this are dangerous when they are regarded as God’s word, for they can be used to justify some of the terrible things that are taking place in Israel/ Palestine at the present. And what are we to do with the words of the Psalmist, at the end of Psalm 137, who thought it good to dash children against stones? There used to be a Sunday newspaper, *The News of the World*, which was famous for its scurrilous stories; it boasted that ‘All human life is here’. The book of Psalms is a bit like that – it contains all human

life. Human life and reactions – sometimes commendable, sometimes reprehensible. Throughout the book, the Psalmist keeps up a conversation with God – praising him, confessing his own failures, and complaining.

How are we to read the Old Testament? A great deal depends on *how* one interprets it. Jewish rabbis frequently argued about its meaning. One fascinating example of how interpretations could differ is to be found in the writings of St Paul. As a Jew, he was soaked in the Old Testament, and he frequently quotes it – but as a Christian, he understands it in a totally different way from his fellow-Jews, for he sees it as a witness to Christ. Now Paul, I find, generally gets a bad press. He is seen as laying down the law in all sorts of ways – telling women to wear hats in church, for example, a rule which was obeyed for 20 centuries – or supporting male dominance and slavery – and there are some Christians who still apply that idea today. But Paul was writing at a different time and in a totally different world from our own. It is ludicrous that the man who insisted that Christians should not be subservient to the Law was turned by later generations into the great law-giver. He would not have expected those living in a different culture to follow instructions shaped by his.

I have at home a collection of much-thumbed Ordnance Survey maps – the only way to negotiate a journey on foot or by car in the days before the invention of GPS and Sat. navs. If I now take my Cambridge OS map and try to follow the path from Grange Road to Coton, I will discover that my path through blackberry fields is now bisected by the M11, which had not been dreamt of when the map was made. The questions I need answered now are quite different from those I asked 50 years ago; not how to cross a field, but how to negotiate the motorway. In the same way, the ethical questions

confronting us – about DNA and AI, about euthanasia and climate change, are not those that confronted Paul.

But ask another question – ask *why* Paul told women to cover their heads, and you discover that in his era no respectable woman appeared in public bareheaded; for Christians – anxious to demonstrate their freedom from laws – to do so would bring the community into disrepute. Ask *why* Paul did not challenge male dominance or the practice of slavery, and you realize that these, too, were part of the culture – but even more important, that Paul insisted that in the Christian community there *was* no male or female, slave or free, Jew or Gentile: all were equal.

Far more important than any rule is the theological method by which Paul made judgements. He ‘listened for the word of God’ in *his* situation. In every case, he appeals back to the Gospel. If Christ behaved in certain ways, his followers should do the same; their motive should be love for others, since the whole law can be summed up in the command to love your neighbour as yourself. Their behaviour must be guided not by laws, but by the Holy Spirit, whose gifts are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control – gifts, you notice, which amount to loving your neighbour. Here is a timeless way to approach ethical questions; not lifting answers from another culture, but asking simply – what did Jesus do? What is the best way for us to show love for others? If everyone did that, all that would divide us would be the discussion of how best to put others first.

How do I read the Bible? *Not* as an infallible book. Not as a kind of recipe-book or how-to-do manual. Not just as literature. But you may well ask

also *why* I bother to read it. Well, just as the Old Testament was understood by Christians to be a witness, pointing forward to Christ, so the New Testament is also a witness to him, and to God's self-revelation in him. It records what men and women remembered about Jesus, and why he was significant for them. The Gospels, written by four different people, reflect four different ways in which his story was seen to be life-changing. The letters of Paul show us how a great theologian grappled with the relevance of the Gospel in the Gentile world. Christians today have to work out how that same Gospel is still relevant in the modern world, and how it should guide their actions.

And so I find myself engaged in a kind of conversation with the Bible, which involves raising questions and learning how others before me have 'listened for the Word of God' and done their best to act on that word in their own lives.