

Sermon preached by the Rev'd Canon Philip Banks
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Sunday 29 October 2017 – Bible Sunday (Year A)

The Bible – a tool for the Christian Life

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly (Colossians 3)

Some of you know that my father, who died some years back, was born not far from here, in Cavendish. One of my memories of him was how he was able to turn his hand to any number of practical building projects – woodwork, plumbing, wiring, plastering, carpentry. Looking back now, perhaps he sowed the seeds of my interest in buildings and then my training as a Chartered Surveyor. He had a very steady hand, and I've never been able to achieve his perfect straight lines with paint brush, nor his skill with chisel, plane, saw and trowel. What I did learn though was how important it is to use tools correctly if you want a good end product and avoid being injured in the process (I still carry the scar on my hand of an accident with a cutting tool when I was a careless teenager.

A wise theological college lecturer once said to me that the Bible is a tool for us Christians to use in our Christian life – and, like a tool, it has to be used with care and in the right way. That thought has always stayed with me. Today is Bible Sunday, the last Sunday in the Trinity Season before we head into All Saints'-tide. Most of us have a Bible (I'm sure that's true of all of us here!). Many of us have more than one, given to us at special times in our lives. Perhaps we might have a family bible, given down through the generations, inscribed with the names of our ancestors who have long since gone to glory.

The sad reality is that, while this is still the world's best-selling book, those who research these things say that, in our western world, it's perhaps the least read book.

So Bible Sunday encourages us to pick up the Bible, turn its pages, re-examine our attitude to it: see it as a tool to be used correctly in our Christian journey of exploration.

Now, as we flip through the pages, we encounter what may be a problem for us. There is plenty of diversity and conflicting information. How could it be otherwise – when we realise how it came to be written? It is a library of books, written over a thousand+ years – with an oral tradition behind the words. It is in three different languages, by people from different backgrounds and cultures – and it contains story, history, myth, theology, letters, poetry, song and prayer (at least!). Those who wrote the books never imagined that they were writing a canon of Scripture – yet we now accept that God reveals himself – through them and their writings – without bypassing human reason or experience.

So there is bound to be diversity in the Bible. We may have been brought up to think that everything in the Bible is true: that it is a perfect vehicle of God's communication to us – and that therefore there cannot be errors. To think like this, though, robs the Bible of its power to challenge us. Think about the way in which God (obviously the 'leading character') is portrayed in the Bible. Both Jews and Christians don't question the existence of God, and in the Old and New Testament we are dealing with the same God – and that brings unity to the Bible. But there are huge differences in the kind of God portrayed throughout the 66 books in the Bible.

Let me take you on a brief journey:

In the earliest days, the Israelites regarded God as being the God of their people – concerned only with them – he was their ‘exclusive property’. And because they had to fight for existence, their God had to be fierce and warlike, fighting on their side.

They believed that there was more than one God – for their God (Yahweh) was a God above all others.

Then as we read further, we see how they came to believe that there is only *one* God of creation and humanity. Indeed, some of the prophets saw that this one God wanted all peoples, not just the Israelites, to worship him. But that view of God wasn’t one which prevailed in the development of Judaism: when Jesus came they still saw God as only being concerned with them, their history, their place in the divine plan.

Jesus in the New Testament reveals a very different God – one who is the Father of all humankind – who loves all – and who wants everyone to see themselves as his children.

to be baptized in a few moments, will learn – through his family and church family – more and more of the person of Jesus: the God who came to break into our lives and break down all the barriers that men and women had erected – including barriers of gender, culture and race. God is the God of the Gentiles – you and me – the non-Jewish races of the world.

Throughout the Bible, then, we have a gradual revelation of the character of God and his will for creation, culminating in the coming of Jesus. And therefore – when I read the Bible – I have to take that journey into account, and I don’t need to be surprised or shocked when God is portrayed, for instance, as a bloodthirsty tyrant. The zeal we read of in those sections of the Bible – for God and his righteousness – is part of this gradual process of revelation. And we shouldn’t try to cover over the

fact that, when God’s character is described in scripture, there will be diversity of imagery.

So Bible Sunday should remind us that, whilst we accept that God reveals himself through the pages of scripture, understanding the Bible is less straightforward than some Christians, usually noisy Christians, would like us to think. The Bible of course often hits us as ‘bright as crystal’, as ‘sweet as honey’ (the Psalms): the Beatitudes, for instance, or the great parables of Jesus, or stories of Christ’s life and passion/death/resurrection. But we have to be careful to assume that, in today’s world, we can necessarily follow rules and regulations designed for life 2,000 or more years ago: what a peculiar idea of God it would give us – a God whose mind got stuck in one moment of time. It might be human nature to resist change, but “God is forever young”: ‘God our contemporary’. For us, the Bible represents steps on the journey of God’s people – to be attended to, but not ‘the end’.

So although we regard (as it has in the words of the Collect today) ‘all Holy Scripture has been written for our learning’, that doesn’t mean that every text is meaningful or helpful all the time and in every context. Does that mean that I can pick and choose? No – the Bible has been given to us. However I can say “this bit isn’t helpful to me just now, and I’ll therefore move on and perhaps come back to it another time”. There’s no benefit in pouring over every text trying to get a message from it.

There is a painting – in the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin – of the episode in Luke’s gospel where the 12-year-old Jesus is found by Joseph and Mary in the Temple, with learned teachers of the Jewish law; and Jesus, it says, was ‘both *hearing* them and asking them questions’. The painting shows the boy seated at the top of a flight of stairs, with the ancient sages ranged at his feet, hanging on his every word. He is like one of those child prodigies who

plays the violin better than their elders. But that's fanciful and it is not what the story actually says: Jesus was hearing and asking. Jesus in conversation, learning, needing – as well as teaching and challenging.

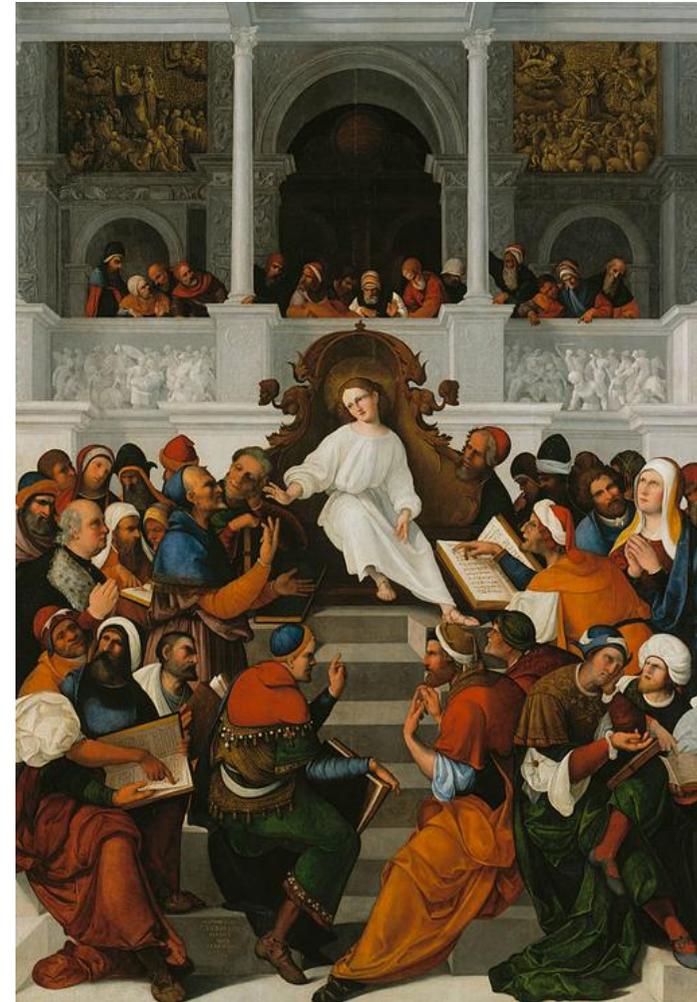
In other words, God does not treat us as if we were blank sheets of paper on whom he can print whatever he wants. He engages us in conversation – the conversation of thoughts, of life, in the church family and beyond. We can respond as we choose, but as in our relations with others, we are wise to be humble – to give *and* to learn – not because we are compelled, but because we desire a relationship with God and he with us. So God does not dominate, but he prods and suggests and asks through scripture.

So today we give thanks for the gift of God's word, for the gift of God speaking to us through the pages of holy scripture. We pray, in the words of our second reading, that the word of Christ dwell in us richly. A learned priest-friend once said to me, when we were discussing how to use the Old Testament when preaching: "Never use the Gestapo method when interpreting scripture: never grab the text and say to it "we have ways of making you talk"".

Good advice if we are to use the Bible as a tool in our Christian journey of exploration into God and his will for our lives and our world.

PS. I think my father would be pretty pleased with me, as, even if I still can't use a plane properly, nor can I re-plumb a bathroom, I am pretty good at most practical repairs or projects around the house, and I still have (and use) some of my father's excellent tools – the very ones he always arranged so carefully on the workbench in the cellar of our family home.

Philip Banks, October 2017



The Twelve-Year-Old Jesus Teaching in the Temple

by Ludovico Mazzolino (1480–1530)

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