St Mary's, Warwick.
The Bible: Now.

May I speak in the name of God,
Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.
Amen

The Cuban-born Italian writer, Italo Calvino, famously wrote, 'It is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear.'[1]

Nowhere is this truer than in our relationship with scripture. We humans are narrative animals: 'Homo Fabulans - the tellers and interpreters of narrative.' Our consumption of stories is enormous. Whether in the form of television, film, books, theatre, political campaigns… we never seem to tire of being told a tale. And we can't seem to help telling tales… stories of our daily lives, convenient fictions that allow us to live with uncomfortable truths… we can't seem to avoid turning life into a story with a plot, with protagonists and antagonists… everything from the stories of our origins to how we heroically battled the *Beast from the East* and made it through the snow to church today. Philosophers have argued that it is the very skills involved in storytelling, our imaginations and schematising capacities, that allow us to experience time and life itself.

Perhaps it is not so surprising that we are creatures of story. We are, after all, the unruly children of a Creator God; artist par excellence, weaver of stories and meaning. And in the Bible, we have an amazing array of stories and verse that chronicle God's relationship with his people. Our God does not direct temporality from the side-lines of eternity, a distant voice that calls out of the heavens. This notion is well and truly interrupted by the presence of Christ in the Christian story. God himself enters the story realm already framed by the Old Testament, requiring that we read the stories of the Old Testament with new incarnational eyes.

Yes, the Bible contains the foundational stories of Christianity, but that is only the beginning of the story. As Reinhold Niebuhr said: 'revelation is transfer from this history to our history.'[2] The power of any story is in its capacity to engage us, deepen understanding or affect change.

As Christians, we often look to the Bible as a lens through which we can understand something of the meaning of life. We hope to find in its pages the answers to the big questions, such as: What does an ethical life look like? Is there meaning to be found in suffering? Alongside the age-old question: Who am I?

Some struggle with this collection of ancient texts trying to decipher what they might have to say about peculiarly modern predicaments, such as the appropriateness of stem cell research, or the ethics of climate change. And it never fails to amaze me how some feel that they do in fact find, not just guidance on these complex issues, but proof-texts that allow them to proclaim knowledge of the mind of God.

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[1] Marco Polo to Kublai Khan in: Calvino, Italo. *Invisible Cities*. London: Vintage. 2010
[2] Niebuhr, H. Richard. *The Meaning of Revelation*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. 2006

I can't help feeling that, more often than not, scripture serves as less of a hermeneutical lens and more of a mirror. Instead of reading our lives and times through the lens of scripture, I would argue that the way that we read the Bible…the way that we use the Bible in theological and philosophical discourse, the way that we appropriate biblical stories in the arts, also reflects back to us something of who we are. Western society and culture is intimately bound with the Bible, our readings of the Good Book are, in part, an elaborate dance with our own reflections.

So, how are we reading the Bible now?

The Bible often seems to be one of the main sites of our division as Christians, or at least we designate it as our battleground. How the biblical texts should be read and appropriated for theological reflection is the source of much mud flinging between liberals and evangelicals, Catholics and Calvinists, and just about every other fake binary pairing you care to propose.

Liberals and Catholics accuse evangelicals of Biblicism, in other words, holding too rigidly to the literal sense of the Bible, accepting only scripture as a source of knowledge and authority. While evangelicals accuse liberals of preferencing other sources over the Word of God and twisting words of scripture to fit their political and social agendas.

The Evangelical Alliance say this on their website:

'Many who call themselves (or are called) liberal Christians might also have a high view of the Bible, but what distinguished classical liberal theology as it developed in the 19th century was a conviction that our experience or understanding, or something nebulous called 'progress' could correct the Bible; evangelicals stood against this - and will continue to do so when it occasionally re-appears.'

Whereas, they argue:

'Evangelicals have generally affirmed a 'plain sense' way of reading the Bible - the text means what it looks like it means; this is not to say that evangelicals are naively literalist… where the form of the text requires a non-literal reading, a 'plain sense' reading is necessarily non-literal.'

They go on to say that:

'Evangelicals will also tend to agree with the classical Reformation position that "scripture is its own interpreter": where a passage is obscure, or can be read in more than one way, it should be read so as to agree with a clearer or less ambiguous passage found elsewhere in the Bible. Underlying this is the conviction that, in all its variety, the Bible speaks with a united, if complex and polyphonous, voice, and so we should not find contradictions.'[3]

Liberal interpreters of the Bible try to engage with reason, tradition and experience when interpreting scripture. Scripture is not the dictated word of the Holy Spirit, but rather, the Word as written down by unreliable human narrators who told the stories in ways that reflected their own social, ethical and theological concerns. Hence there are four different Gospels, each telling the tale of Jesus's life from their own point of view, even when, in the

[3] http://www.eauk.org/church/resources/theological-articles/evangelicals-and-the-bible.cfm

case of the three synoptic Gospels, the evangelists were likely working from one source. This does not, however, mean that for liberals the Bible is any less 'true' or any less divinely inspired.

The turn to historical and form criticism saw both liberal and evangelical theologians and biblical scholars trying to read the texts in light of current historical understandings. They began to wonder how the parables would have sounded to a first century Jewish audience, how they might have heard them differently to the way we hear them. Scholars wondered whether Isaiah was one or three writers, writing with the same authority but in different periods. And they also wondered how the transition from oral to written culture may have influenced the transmission of Israel's history.

I am of course presenting these differing approaches in an overly-simplistic way, but I think that we have reached a very strange point in our relationship with the Bible when both evangelicals and liberals tend to employ proof-texts to support their agendas… when talking about the role of women in the church or sexuality or our responsibility towards the poor (though liberals would argue that they arrive at their proof texts through a complex and reasoned hermeneutical procedure).

It is indeed a strange situation when in the US, Donald Trump quotes the Bible in order to garner the support of the evangelical Christian right as a kind of proof text that he will defend their values despite his very public disdain for those values in his own life. And as Martyn Percy, Dean of Christchurch, Oxford pointed out in his Guardian article a few weeks back, Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham, 'told millions of America's evangelicals that they could vote for Trump with a clear conscience since Trump was comparable to the ancient Persian ruler Cyrus, mentioned in the Old Testament.' In other words, don't worry that he doesn't actually share your faith… better to have someone who protects your values and reclaims Washington power from them liberals! Percy goes on to say:

'…Trump, in this equation, therefore emerges as a liberator-messiah-ruler, and Washington as a kind of centralising Babylon. And you don't need to be a genius to work out that Trump is the Cyrus who delivers all God-fearing Americans from that awful prospect of the Whore of Babylon (Book of Revelation, chapters 17 and 18) living in the White House. "Drain the swamp" and "lock her up" are therefore implicit religious rallying calls, not just injudicious hate speech. These are the chants of the self-proclaimed righteous.'[4]

If ever we needed proof that it is the ear that demands the story.

This kind of modern fundamentalism encourages a vehement response from that other peculiarly modern group of people… fundamentalist atheists, for it is with this kind of rhetoric… this kind of Biblical literalism that they engage. As the reformation began the march towards secularism, fundamentalism has cast its own shadow in the shape of unprecedented opposition to religion.

But what else have we lost in this battle?

[4] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/06/donald-trump-faith-politics-religious-presidency

Karen Armstrong in *The Case for God* argued that in the ancient world there were two recognised way of thinking, speaking and acquiring knowledge: mythos and logos.

Logos, marked by reason and pragmatic modes of thought focussed on external reality. Myths were not just a collection of fantastical stories, neither were they meant to be an accurate telling of historical events. Rather, mythological stories were those that '…in some sense happened once but that also happen all the time.'[5]

For the ancients, neither mode of knowing was superior to the other, they were instead complementary. Myth might not help you build a temple, but it might help you navigate the very human experiences of suffering, grief and falling in love.

Armstrong argues that during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, logos achieved such incredible results that mythos was almost entirely discredited. Even theologians adopted the criteria of logos leading to rationalised interpretations of religions and literal interpretations of the Bible.

Karen Armstrong said: 'In their desire to produce a wholly rational, scientific faith that abolished mythos in favour of logos, Christian fundamentalists have interpreted scripture with a literalism that is unparalleled in the history of religion.'

Acceptance of credal statements became the prerequisites of faith rather than the adoption of the correct psychological or spiritual posture that led you to 'make the 'truth' of the myth a reality in your own life.' Or, in the words of that great modern hymn… Shine, Jesus Shine… (which I know is particular favourite of Vaughan's) 'mirrored here, may our lives tell your story.'

Of course, Armstrong is in no way the first to argue for a reversion to a more mythological understanding of the Bible. Lutheran theologian and professor of New Testament, Rudolf Bultmann back in the 1940s and 50s argued that we needed to 'demythologize' scripture… that is, not to stop reading scripture mythologically… that he said, would be to demythicize scripture… but rather, through a process of demythologization we could extricate the true symbolic meaning. Robert Segal gives the example of the flood. To go seeking evidence for a world-wide flood would be to demythicize the text, but to demythologize the Noah story would be to read it symbolically as a statement about the precariousness of life.

Bultmann said: 'The real purpose of life is not to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but to express man's understanding of himself in the world in which he lives. Myth should be interpreted not cosmologically, but anthropologically, or better still, existentially.'

Bultmann thought that once the Bible was demythologized (in other words: remythologize) it would once again become compatible with the modern drive towards scientific rationalism, because the Bible would in a sense be set free to refer once again to the transcendent, non-physical world… to our human experience of that world.[6]

Philosopher, Paul Ricouer argued that one of St Paul's most extraordinary contributions was the theme of the transformation of the reader of scripture. Ricoeur said: 'In this way he

[5] Armstrong, Karen. *The Case for God: What Religion Really Means.* London:Vintage, 2010
[6] See: Segal, Robert. *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: OUP. 2015

forged the central metaphor of the Christian self as Christomorphic, that is, the image of the image par excellence. A chain of glory…' by which we mirror Christ's life with our own.[7]

At the beginning of John's Gospel we are told that the word became flesh and dwelt among us. If the Christian self is Christomorphic, surely it is incumbent on us to continue to make the word flesh. Demythologizing the Bible demands of us that we acknowledge the ways in which we read and are read by the text. How our lives and culture have been formed by the grammar of the Bible… how our laws and norms have been shaped and how they in turn shape us.

Bultmann, and Armstrong after him, suggest that demythologizing the Bible is the work, not of an apologist, but of an evangelist…work that invites people into the habitus of the story and allows them to work out what it means to live out the Gospel in their own lives. This, they would argue, returns religious knowledge from a theoretical to a practical pursuit. In other words – all the mud-slinging and proof-texting are as nothing if Christians do nothing more than argue in the abstract. With a demythologised Bible, scripture is not shoe-horned into one dimension only. There is more to see…. And possibly more ground to explore together across the theological divides, in the way that scriptural reasoning has opened space to talk across the religious divide. Because we must find a way to change the conversation… if we don't, then we have to expect to see the Bible being reduced to a political punchline, a shibboleth to be adopted by those who would seek to deepen the divisions in our churches and in our society.

So where do we go from here? How can we form communities of the Book in a way that honours the Word made flesh?

I'm going to end with a rather long quote from theologian Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, because I think perhaps he signposts the way that we might go from here:

'The Bible is fundamentally a story of a people's journey with God... Scripture is an account of human existence as told by God. In scripture, we see that God is taking the disconnected elements of our lives and pulling them together into a coherent story that means something. When we lack such a truthful, coherent account, life is likely to be perceived as disconnected, ad hoc. … It is just one damn thing after another. How does God deal with human fear, confusion, and paralysis? God tells a story: I am none other than the God who "brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." (Deut 5.6) …Israel is a people who learn this story by heart and gather regularly to retell it. …Story is the fundamental means of talking about and listening to God, the only human means available to us that is complex and makes engaging enough to make comprehensible what it means to be with God. Early Christians, interestingly, began not with creedal speculation about the metaphysics of the Incarnation-that is, Christology abstracted from the Gospel accounts. They began with stories about Jesus, about those whose life got caught up in his life. …We cannot know Jesus without following Jesus. Engagement with Jesus, as the misconceptions of his first disciples show, is necessary to understand Jesus... By telling these stories, we come to see the significance and coherence of our lives as a gift, as something not of our own heroic creation, but as something that must be told to us, something we would not have known without the

[7] Ricoeur, Paul. "The Summoned Subject in the School of the Narratives of the Prophetic Vocation." in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 1995

community of faith. The little story I call my life is given cosmic, eternal significance as it is caught up within God's large account of history. … Christians are those who hear this story and are able to tell it as our salvation." (pp.54-5)… Salvation is baptism into a community that has so truthful a story that we forget ourselves and our anxieties long enough to become part of that story, a story God has told in Scripture and continues to tell in Israel and the church." (p58)…Under such a story life ceases to be the from just one damn thing after another, sort of existence we have known before. The little things of life-marriage, children, visiting an eighty-year-old nursing home resident, listening to a sermon-are redeemed and given eschatological significance. Our fate is transformed into our destiny; that is, we are given the means of transforming our past, our history of sin, into a future of love and service to neighbour." (p.67) How does this work?: "Because we have experienced a story of how One came to us and received us as strangers and forgave us as friends, we expect to receive strangers and to be offered forgiveness elsewhere. Our story enables us to have community on the basis of something more substantial than 'melting pot' blandness, to have community rather than eternal hostility among subgroups because we are so different. Our particular community know the story that tells how the Risen Christ returned to his friends, even when they were his betrayers, and because we know it, we know to expect him to return to us, to stand among us, to forgive us, even to bless us.'[8]

Community rather than eternal hostility… wouldn't that be nice?

Amen.

[8] Hauwerwas, Stanley & Willimon, William. *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*. London: Abingdon. 1989 (This is a longer extract than was used on the night!)