

**Sermon preached at St Mary's by Vaughan S. Roberts  
on Bible reading as part of 'Passionate Spirituality', 8<sup>th</sup> Mar. 2015**

On the first four Sunday mornings in Lent this year we're reflecting on the outcome of our 8 Essential Qualities survey. The area we need to address most is that of spirituality, which includes prayer and Bible reading. Last week we looked at prayer and this week we explore how we use scripture. Once again we have white cards for people to write down any reflections, comments or ideas to put in the collection plate, hand to the vicar or send to the church office.

So what is the Bible and how should we read it? The first thing to say is: The Bible isn't a science manual but it does contain aspects of science. The Bible isn't a history text book but it does include elements of history. The bible isn't a book for a music course but it does have songs. The Bible isn't a law book but it does include rules and it does talk about justice. The Bible doesn't tell us how to build weapons or how to use the internet but it does teach people to be responsible for their actions. So, what *kind* of a book is the bible?

We get a clue on how to answer that question in the fact that we give a Bible to young people at their baptism and thinking through why we do that is helpful in understanding the nature of the book. Of course there are different ways to approach scripture. Historians dissect it to try and identify the ways in which different parts were written. That's right and proper. Chroniclers have turned it into novels and collections of short stories. Again that's fine. And film-makers have made it into cinematic blockbusters. That's not a problem. All of those uses are perfectly acceptable but they only hint at the value of scripture.

If we dig deeper behind all of those approaches and re-tellings of the Bible then we'll see that one of the things scripture is: it's a store of memories, which tells us where we come from. We probably all know how the stories shared between families and friends work. Often such shared moments will begin along the lines of: Do you recall when ...? Do you remember that Christmas? You know when we went to ...

One of the ways the Bible works is like an old photo album – a store of memories about how people have encountered God. And these memories, these stories have had a profound impact upon humanity at so many levels – influencing cultures, communities, families and individuals. One respected commentator says that 'if we want to understand scripture, and find it doing its proper work in and through us' then we should keep in mind that: 'We do not read it as a flat uniform list of regulations and doctrines. We read it as the narrative in which we ourselves are called to take part. We read it to discover 'the story so far', and also 'how it's supposed to end' (Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* p294).

So one of the reasons why we give a Bible at baptism is because that person is becoming part of God's family and scripture is a crucial part of that family story. It tells of how humanity has encountered God in many different ways: in the drama of a journey such as those undertaken by Abraham and Sarah or the Hebrew slaves and their Exodus from Egypt; or in the crisis of events such as the exile to Babylon and the challenging return to Jerusalem; and in damaged characters such as Noah and Moses, flawed kings such as David and Solomon; in grumpy prophets like Jonah and Amos.

And we find similar individuals in the New Testament – neither Peter nor Paul are without *their* flaws. Even Jesus sometimes seems abrupt, curt and even angry with some of those he meets. The Bible isn't about perfect people encountering a perfect God. God maybe perfect but our experience of the Divine is always filtered through human imperfection. At one level

that's encouraging, since we don't have to be perfect ourselves to encounter God. But at another level we need to read scripture with care – it's not a simple multiplication table from which we can extrapolate the mind of God. We do need to bring our minds and our critical faculties to these stories.

So the Bible is a richly textured collection of story, wisdom and guidance. It's a record of the mighty acts of God, containing gifts to God's children and their responses. The Bible is a book about faith. On the whole the Bible is written by people of faith to arouse and nurture faith. We give copies of it to those who are baptised because it's a storehouse of the faith into which they're being baptised. It's an account of the family's stories, memories and meetings with God. And in making such a presentation, we're not saying that everyone's experience of God will be the same because there's a wide variety of Divine encounter in scripture. Rather, we're saying these are some of the ways in which it's possible to meet God – through life's events, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, through the haunting sound of silence which allows us to hear the inner voice of God. And those are just three.

The story goes that when the youngest son of the renowned writer, Charles Dickens, was leaving home for Australia, his father gave him a New Testament and explained why he had done so. 'Because it is the best book that there ever was, or will be known in the world; and because it teaches you the best lesson by which any human creature can possibly be guided.'

And there's one more reason why the Bible is so important for us – it's the record of God's engagement with our world through a person: Jesus Christ – the Word made flesh. Again, the New Testament is a mixture of styles and literary forms. So we can't read Revelation in the same way that we read Romans; even within the Gospels we can't read a parable in the same way as the Passion. But in the New Testament we will encounter the human face of God in the face of Jesus the teacher, healer and redeemer.

So if we immerse ourselves in the sea of scripture in a similar way to being covered by the waters of baptism we will meet with the Living God in one way or another, in one form or another.

In our 8 Essential Qualities survey our *strongest* characteristics were Gift-based Ministry and Inspiring Worship, and the weakest was Spirituality. Within our spirituality profile we scored lowly on questions such as: 'The Bible is a powerful guide for me in the decisions of everyday life' and 'I enjoy reading the Bible on my own'. We're not the only church in this position but the questions I'd like us to reflect upon this week are:

How should we read the Bible?

In what ways can the Bible guide our lives?

Are there ways in which we can bring scripture alive?