

St. Mary's, Warwick

The Bible in Worship

Forming God's People

1. 'Knowing' the Bible.

Let me begin with a short extract or quote – I'm not sure of its original provenance, but anyway here it is:

‘There was a good Samaritan going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and he fell among thorns and they sprang up and they choked him and left him half dead.

He said, “I will arise”, and he arose and came to a tree and he got hung on the limb and he hung there for forty days and forty nights, and the ravens fed him. Delilah came along with a pair of shears and cut off his hair and he fell on rocky ground.

He said, “I will arise” and he came to a wall and Jezebel was sitting on the wall and he said, “Throw her down”. And great was the fall thereof, and of the fragments they gathered twelve baskets full. And whose wife will she be in the resurrection?’

For those of you who know it, it's rather like a biblical parody in the same way that *1066 And All That* is a historical parody. The note on the source from which I quarried it says ‘Essay by a Sunday School student with a poor attendance record!’

It is a parody but it's not too far from the truth. You only need read the regular *Dumb Britain* column in *Private Eye* to understand the poor state of general knowledge, let alone of the Bible. From the age of about 5 until I was perhaps 11 years old I was ‘sent’ to Sunday School at an Evangelical Free Church. It was called Cecil Hall after the road in which it was situated, and effectively it was a Baptist tabernacle, a proprietary chapel. Looking back, I knew it was never ‘my style’, but the people there were lovely and I certainly learnt much about what is in the Bible and indeed where it comes.

To *know the Bible* is a crucial part of any western education, if for no other reason that it has been one of the key sources and shapers of our culture. Art, morality, government, literature and almost every other aspect of life has been influenced by Holy Scripture. Seven years ago when we celebrated four hundred years of the King James' Version you would hear catches of phrases, couplets – even clichés whose origins lie in either the Old or New Testament – fly in the ointment, way of all the earth, falling by the wayside etc.

Even Thomas Hardy the poet and novelist – by no means a conventional Christian or believer left a Bible covered in annotations and comments. His novels are

both peppered with biblical extracts and formed on so many occasions by insights from Scripture. So my first reflection is that *Knowing the Bible* is crucial culturally, and for Christian individuals and communities, it is part of the lifeblood. We are, of course, not a religion of a *book* (cf Islam and the Koran), as Archbishop Michael Ramsey famously reminded us, but a religion of a *person* – Jesus Christ. Nonetheless, it is through the pages of Scripture that the face of Jesus Christ is revealed most obviously – and, of course, the one place where all Christian people will encounter the Bible is in the *liturgy*.

2. Reading and Singing the Scriptures

Probably the earliest evidence of the use of scripture in worship is the book of Psalms. Used in ancient Israel's worship, all Church of England clergy should know them well. Why – because we are all required to say Morning and Evening Prayer daily and Archbishop Thomas Cranmer included a psalter that was intended to be said in its entirety within one month. Whichever office clergy use, *the psalms* are perhaps the key formative element. So here are hymns that have been used in Judeo-Christian worship for between 2,500 and 3,000 years. Here is one element of the Bible in worship.

Then, if we needed any convincing of Thomas Cranmer's belief in the significance of the Bible in worship, we need look no further than his collect for the Second Sunday in Advent, which doubtless you'll all remember. It runs:

‘Blessed Lord, who has caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read - mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou has given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.’

Professor Henry Chadwick argued that that first comma, after ‘hear them’ was a later interpolation. Assuming that to be so, the prayer would read: ‘that we may in such wise hear them read, mark, learn and inwardly digest...’ That makes much sense of Cranmer's view of the importance of the Bible.

3. The Bible within the Liturgy

Assuming that background, we come upon the Bible within the liturgy in three different ways – as it *shapes the liturgy*, as it *sets out the drama of our salvation*, and as we encounter it directly in the ‘*liturgy of the Word*’, that is, as it is proclaimed in the readings either in the eucharist or the daily offices – or indeed in baptism, marriage and burial rites. So, first

the Scripture *shaping the liturgy*. Already we've seen the key place of psalmody in the daily office of Morning and Evening Prayer. But psalmody is not there, in the offices, only in the reciting of the psalms daily. The versicles and responses are quarried from the book of psalms. The New Testament canticles – the Magnificat, the Benedictus and the Nunc Dimittis are psalm-like pieces of literature. Often the *collects* are shaped and quarried from Scripture. So, for example, in one of Cranmer's greatest collects, that for Advent Sunday. You'll remember how it begins:

‘Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light...’

What inspired Cranmer there? Answer, look to the Letter of Paul to the Romans. 13. 12:

‘...the night is far gone and the day is at hand, let us then cast off the works of darkness, and put on the armour of light....’

Similar points could be made with other collects and prayers. We have not time for me to give you a tedious analysis of many other texts of collects, but only cursory research will point you to numerous other examples. Just one more will suffice. On Quinquagesima Sunday in the Book of Common Prayer, I. Corinthians 13, the hymn to charity (love) is read and so the collect mirrors this:

‘O Lord, who hast taught us that all our doings without charity are nothing worth. . .’ So it goes on.

The liturgy then, and not just in the Anglican tradition, is shaped and moulded by Scripture – sometimes with a catena of phrases chosen from across the Testaments and, indeed, not always well rehearsed. Some years ago, I wrote an article making the plea that the liturgy ought not to be a victim of ‘concordance theology’. A concordance is a sort of dictionary pointing to the occurrence of words in the Old and New Testament. Some writers – and liturgists – have found it too easy to look up all references to a certain word – be it shepherd, promise, father and so on – and then amalgamate them into a liturgical *mélange* when their original contexts were quite different!

Then, second, I talked of the ‘*drama of salvation*’. We can easily forget that the eucharistic prayers, in all their contemporary variety, set out for us the mystery of our faith. We are taken through the passion, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ – we rehearse, what the great German liturgical scholar, Odo Casel, described as the ‘profound and determinative mystery of our faith’. Casel argued that in coming to the eucharist weekly or daily even, it is not like taking in the car to fill up with fuel for the

week. We go not for our own support and nurture, primarily. Instead we go, because we are immersed, taken down, into that great mystery of our faith in Jesus, and, so we are transformed. We are then sent out in this transformed state so that we might touch the lives of others, such that the saving mystery of Christ may have some impact upon them.

This requires of the liturgist great care in composing the Eucharistic narrative and the entire Eucharistic rite, something to which I advert in that article I mentioned earlier. I argue for the use of one evangelist, and thus for an account which includes that evangelist's theology throughout. A recent dramatic example of the sort of problems I air, is set out in an excellent recent volume titled *Lost in Translation*. This is an account of the suppression of the draft 1998 Roman Catholic Mass rite. That rite was meticulous in its use of Scripture. The highly imperfect 2011 rite, however, suffers from precisely the sorts of inadequacy I've suggested – in this case, by very poor and over-literalistic translation.

Then, finally, I adverted to *the Liturgy of the Word*. This is effectively the first part of the eucharist up to the Peace. It is paralleled to a degree in the two readings – Old Testament and New – in Morning and Evening Prayer. Here the readings are chosen both to fit the season, feast or memorial and also to expose us all to as wide a possible spectrum of biblical teaching. In the eucharist, the aim is always to include an O.T. reading alongside a Gospel and one other N.T. reading.

4. Formation:

Finally let us spend a moment on what I would describe as the formative nature of the liturgy. So let me go back and remind you of the brief reading we heard from the Letter to the Ephesians:

‘Look carefully then, how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of the time ... understand what the will of the Lord is.’

Then it is all set in the context of:

‘...addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs....’

There is a linkage here – and elsewhere in Scripture between wisdom – that is God's wisdom rather than what Paul describes as ‘the foolishness of men.’ The liturgy can form us, then, in that wisdom which is about the learning of the true virtues. How can the liturgy effect this? Let me just touch on four complementary elements.

First, then, a critical understanding. The Bible like any other great literature, is mediated through our humanity. We believe that God is revealed there, but it is mediated

through human authors, and, of course, humanity always has its flaws. Also different men and women see the world differently. Enter here, on the scene, critical scholarship. *Critical* does not mean criticism. It means instead using the very best of scholarship to further plumb the meaning of scripture. So, for example, the four gospels do not always agree with each other. There are fascinating differences. But if one takes *one gospel*, at a time, and as a whole, these differences indicate how that evangelist has interpreted Jesus' life and teaching. Mark's Jesus, whom we hear in this lectionary year differs from Luke's, which differs from Matthew's and John's. So, in the liturgy, as elsewhere, critical scholarship assists us in reading the Bible intelligently. We gain much by understanding how the Bible came to be.

Then second, *the Bible is not a rule book*. That means that there will be places where the strange and very different culture of this ancient literature stands at a distance from our own. So using specific biblical passages as proof texts – in sermons or elsewhere is no way to use Scripture. The Bible's contribution to our moral life is not derived in that way. We shall not be able to read off a response to genetic experimentation or homosexuality from regular attendance at Evensong.

Instead, and this is the third point. The Bible is an immense pool of *nourishing spiritual food*. It is through identifiable *themes* and *images* that the Bible can speak to us. Words like covenant, forgiveness, redemption, grace, creation and many other themes will allow us to explore the variety of teaching which can inform our wisdom, and nurture the virtues in us.

Finally, there is the *preaching of the Word*. The preacher will have a variety of tasks – to edify, to teach, to admonish and again to nourish our spiritual lives and build up in us the virtues. In achieving this, the preacher is not a didactic and damagoc figure. She or he is nearest to being a poet, weaving the images and themes of Scripture into the warp and weft of our daily lives. In a magnificent short monograph, R.E.C. Browne spoke of this a generation or more ago. Austin Farrer, arguably the most creative Anglican theologian of the twentieth century exemplified this in his preaching.

In all this, I hope I have hinted at the crucial role the liturgy inhabits within the Christian life. It is seminal to our growing in the faith. The liturgy is formative of God's Church and within that process it is formative of each of us. Holy Scripture is the matrix on which so much of the liturgy is built, shaped and fashioned.

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