

Last after Trinity – Bible Sunday
St James, Colwall, 25th October 2009

Ten years ago, in Texas, a man committed a murder and was tried and found guilty. In Texas, the jury decides the sentence as well as the verdict and they opted for the death penalty. In deciding this, members of the jury made free use of several quotations from the bible, the book of Numbers in particular: “The murderer shall surely be put to death” and “And if he smite him with an instrument of iron, the murderer shall surely be put to death”. The man was convicted and sentenced to the death penalty, but use of the bible in this way resulted in an appeal, which is why the accused has not yet been executed. But let me ask you. Do you think this is the right use of the bible?

Now I hope that, no matter what your views on the death penalty are, your answer would be, No. But why, exactly? The book of Numbers is clearly meant to be understood literally. There are passages in the Bible, Genesis for example, which are mythical and not intended to be taken literally. The story of the garden of Eden and Eve taking the apple is not so much about disobeying rules as pointing out our condition. The stolen apple gave knowledge of good and evil and without that knowledge we would be like the animals and could do no sin. I could go on about that, but the lessons you draw from this type of writing are not to be obtained by interpreting it literally.

But the book of Numbers is not like that – it is prescriptive and was intended to be taken literally by those for whom it was written. And there are other passages in the bible which are also prescriptive, such as the ten commandments and the sermon on the mount. They are for real and we are meant to follow them *now*, so why make an exception for Numbers? The answer of course lies in the context. The book of Numbers along with Leviticus and Deuteronomy are human documents, specifying the law for the children of Israel as they journeyed to the promised land. They represent what people thought 3,000 years ago. In a word, these books of the law are not prescriptive for us – we have moved on since.

But if we say this, does it mean the bible is not inspired after all? I think it is inspired, but it is still a human record of God’s dealing with us, not something actually dictated by God. You need to look below the surface to see the hand of God and that means understanding the context of what has been written, not only understanding the meaning to those for whom the books were written, but also the context within history. The law was written for the children of Israel escaping the autocratic regime of Egypt, autocratic like the nations around. The law encapsulated the idea of a covenant relationship to God and all were equal within that covenant. Moses was a leader, not a king. This was a very substantial step forward and I don’t think it is exaggeration to see the hand of God in it. But nevertheless, people are only human. Bureaucrats like making laws and priests like making ceremonies and the result is the book of Numbers. And we have to admit that even today we prefer to have things regulated rather than anarchy and we need ceremonial occasions to mark and guide our lives. The detail was necessary at the time as similar detail is necessary now, but in the process of writing it down we can lose the plot and let the detail become the driving force rather than our search for God. So we have to be critical in studying these ancient documents – we study history to avoid the mistakes of the past, not to repeat them.

And there is a lot of history in the bible, some of it fairly irrelevant to us today, like the genealogies and all the detail about ritual in Leviticus. I think you can skip over these without much loss. But the stories in the Old Testament are well worth reading

today and gripping as well as instructive. I remember reading the story of David in 1 & 2 Samuel at one sitting – it was too exciting to put down. And the stories of the patriarchs and the kings, the captivity in Babylon, Daniel in the lion’s den and the fall of Belshazzar are all dramatic stories we can relate to now. They are worth reading for enjoyment, but they also give us food for thought. They need to be understood as they would have been understood by the people for whom they were written but then we need to go beyond that to place them in our own history. As with everything these days, you need to be critical.

As an example, who your father was was extremely important in Old Testament times – that’s why the genealogies are there. Today we try to give it less importance and treat the whole world as our family – although I must say, with limited success. But the point is this: to understand and benefit from the stories we often have to think about what we would do differently today.

As well as stories you can find good advice too. The wisdom literature in the Old Testament is often as relevant today as when it was written. Where would we be without Ecclesiastes: “the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong ...” or “To everything there is a season...”. Or Job: “For I know that my redeemer liveth...”.

And that reminds me of all the poetry too. Where would we be without the 23rd Psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd...” Or the prophecies in Isaiah which we had a sample of in our second reading. These writings have entered our culture and changed who we are today, unlike almost everything else that was written at that time, so don’t tell me the bible was not inspired.

With the New Testament we move into a different world, but we still need to be aware of the 2,000 years which have elapsed since it was written. The stories are there, just as in the Old Testament – think of all the adventures of Paul in Acts and the letters of Paul as he tries to introduce Christian ideas to a world of paganism and understand how to change Christianity from its Jewish origins. Paul had to think how Christianity applied in the world of his time and we have to do the same, so there are lessons to be learnt there. But we need to be as critical with the New Testament as with the Old. We need to understand the historical context. But it is just as enjoyable. The stories are there, the poetry is there. Where would we be without 1 Corinthians 13: “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels ...”.

But rich though this mixture is, it is only the setting for the jewels in the bible, namely the gospels. For those of us who call ourselves Christians, these should be our constant companion. If you are going to read anything in the bible, make sure it includes the gospels. They are not long and the Passion story is harrowing, but the gospels will take you closer to God. And this is the problem isn’t it? We can enjoy the Old Testament because we are at some distance from it. But the gospels challenge us to change our lives now. We need to take all of the bible seriously, but it is the gospels which call on us to follow the way, the truth and the life which is Jesus. It’s a step beyond not doing any harm into actually changing ourselves and the world to bring about the Kingdom of God. We need to take the words of the bible into our hearts but above all the gospels, and as the collect says, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, so that we can show Christ to the world in what we say and what we do – and in our lives.

May God give us grace to do this.