

## Lent 4 - Reflection for March 14<sup>th</sup>

### The understanding of the Bible in the Anglican Tradition

It's easy to caricature the Church of England as a hopeless mishmash, born out of the desire of Henry VIII for a divorce which the Pope wouldn't allow, and later consolidated by Henry's daughter Elizabeth as a 'middle way' between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism in an attempt to 'keep on board' as many people in the nation as possible. Is it then a church at whose heart lies uneasy compromise, rather than conviction or clarity about following the Gospel?

Today we're thinking about how the Anglican tradition understands the Bible. Even during the reign of Henry VIII (who didn't wish to depart from catholic belief or practice, other than denying the Pope's authority) the understanding of the Bible was changing in practical ways. He was persuaded by his more Protestant advisers to authorise the placing of an English Bible in every church, so that all who could read might encounter and understand it for themselves. Thus a major step was taken towards William Tyndale's dream that 'every boy that drives the plough' should know more of the Bible than the Pope did.

Some people see the roots of modern individualism in this protestant emphasis on people reading and interpreting the Bible for themselves – each person becoming his or her own authority on what it means, so that membership of the Church becomes secondary to personal faith, through which the individual communes with God. But to counter this, our Anglican tradition gives central value to 'Common Prayer' – that is, *prescribed liturgy* that we can all join in together. And this liturgy not only creates the space for us to hear the Bible being read and preached-on as a communal event, but also puts the words of Scripture on our lips, week by week as we pray. Our pattern of worship is absolutely steeped in the Bible, not only through direct quotation but also through constant allusions. Sometimes it's the minister who addresses the congregation in the words of Scripture, at other times we all pray together in Biblical terms. (Try counting-up sometime how many quotations and allusions to the Bible there are in our Sunday worship. And this isn't to mention the psalms and scriptural canticles, retained in our tradition as something to be prayed-through daily at morning and evening prayer, and forming an important part of Sunday worship for many Anglicans throughout history.) So we can say, our tradition understands the Bible not just as a *message* but also as a *medium of prayer*, and especially of communal prayer. And in our Anglican roots we have the incomparable beauty of the *Book of Common Prayer*, whose language may be deemed anachronistic for a modern, missionary church, but whose beauty and rhythm give contemporary writers of liturgy a benchmark to live up to – biblically-inspired words which will resonate, be rhythmic enough to say easily together, and impress themselves both upon the community's and the individual's hearts. *Praying it* together is one of the main ways the Bible becomes part of Anglicans' lives.

Secondly, there's an important Anglican tradition of *theology* about understanding the Bible. During Elizabeth I's reign, Richard Hooker wrote *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* - hardly a riveting title, I know! - a book which crystallised a distinct Anglican view. And that is that the Bible is, of course, the supreme authority for the church and for Christians in

matters 'pertaining to salvation' (cf. Article 6 of the *Thirty Nine Articles of Religion*), but that in order to interpret it, it should be read in dialogue with Tradition and Reason. This interplay between Scripture, Tradition and Reason came to be seen as a 'threefold cord' of understanding God's word to us, running through Anglican thought.

In this way of thinking, the word 'Tradition' means the historic Tradition of the Church – the wisdom of the past - and includes particularly the understanding of faith which was held in common when the Church was undivided between East and West. So, in understanding what's essential to salvation in Scripture, Anglicans have tended to look to the era up to the Fourth Century, both the writings of those who have come to be known as 'The Fathers', and the decisions reached in general councils of the Church in that period. These decisions include the formulation of the Creeds, which have been treasured in Anglicanism as a true exposition of the core of Scripture, and particularly the doctrine of salvation through Christ. This is why we often recite them in our services.

But as well as Tradition in the sense of teaching, there are also 'traditions' – practices which are not explicitly mentioned in Scripture, but which are consonant with it, and helpful. Hooker was defining our church's attitude over against the views of Puritans – those more radical Protestants who held that if something is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible, it should not be part of the practice of the church. This Puritan exclusion included big things – like the way the church had historically come to be organised ('ecclesiastical polity') - and smaller things, such as kneeling to receive Holy Communion, the use of rings in marriage, or the sign of the cross in baptism. Hooker and other Anglicans stoutly defended such traditions, not as infallible or necessary, but as being useful in embodying the Gospel. Theirs was a more expansive view than the Puritans'. Just think! The blessing and giving of posies on Mothering Sunday – indeed, the day itself – wouldn't have found a place in a Puritan-run church.

When Hooker spoke of Reason, he did not simply mean the faculty of thinking logically, but also meant a mind informed by 'the Law of Nature'. He lived in the Renaissance when the Aristotle's understanding of the world had been brought to the fore. Modern experimental and observational science (empirical science) had not got off the ground. Many aspects of the Aristotelian world view were factually incorrect, as we now know. For example, Hooker espoused the Aristotelian idea that women are 'scientifically' incomplete versions of men, and therefore should be subordinate by 'the Law of Nature', which is one way God reveals his truth to us. Because of this he held that Bible passages teaching female subordination should be seen as commands to the church 'for all time' and not just for the time in which they were given. However, it's been argued that if he could have seen that 'the science would change', he would have accepted that the interpretation of those passages of scripture as mandatory 'for all time' should also change. Because he taught the dialogue of Scripture with Reason, Hooker might well in modern circumstances have allowed for your female Rector!

Hooker set a pattern for Anglican thought which was much more expansive than Puritan thinking; he believed, for example, that Roman Catholics might be saved even though they didn't properly understand the importance of 'salvation by faith alone', and taught that good works are also necessary. The God of mercy, he said, would overlook this big mistake

in Catholics who were properly penitent when they came before him for judgement. His main Puritan opponent thought he was quite wrong about this.

Hooker set a pattern for Anglican theology in which dialogue, debate and even dispute were inevitably part of the Church's future: Scripture is supreme – yes – but not always unambiguous. Neither Tradition nor Reason is infallible, but they are necessary for understanding God's word to us. We have to keep on discussing how to interpret the Bible using these tools which aren't perfect. And of course, in the history of the Church there have been some who emphasise one element of the threefold cord at the expense of the others, leading to different parties within the Church, different ways of using the Bible.

So it seems we have ended up in the Anglican church with what *looks like* a mish-mash of views – no clear 'line'. But if you dig a bit deeper beneath our disagreements you find a distinctively Anglican method or process of understanding the Bible: keep on discussing it, looking to Tradition and Reason to help us. But don't expect easy resolutions to questions in this life. The important thing is that our disagreements should be carried on in a spirit of charity and expansiveness, so that we can continue to 'walk together' in love and faith.

*P.S. Hooker's main debates were with a Puritan called Walter Travers, with whom he shared a pulpit - one preached in the morning, the other in the afternoon. Their debates were sharp, and about really important things, but Hooker always behaved courteously and charitably towards Travers.*

*Maggie Guite*