

## **Bible Sunday (last after Trinity) 25/10/15**

This year we've chosen to mark the last Sunday after Trinity as the optional Bible Sunday. What's the point of a Bible Sunday, when we get plenty of the Bible every Sunday? Most weeks it's three passages read, plus part of a psalm sung. Isn't that enough?

Well not really, because snippets have their limitations. Our short readings may well contain gems, but if they are our only contact with the Scriptures we don't get any *context* – neither of the gems, nor the chapter, nor of the book, let alone any place in the whole sweep of the Great Biblical Epic. Nor do we get the kind of background that's not in the text itself, but can be found only in commentaries and Bible study. That may sound very boring and specialized, but – believe me – it can open the door to real revelation, to bringing the text alive.

Now, recently we've had some interactive services – don't worry, no small groups, no written answers today. But I would like to put three questions to you, and ask you to hold up your hand if you feel your answer would be Yes. There's no right or wrong here, so don't be shy if you're the only person to put your hand up; nor if you're the only one *not* to.

Q. 1. Do you believe that the world and the universe were literally created from nothing to completion in six days (note, 6 not 7 – it's in the Book!). Don't be embarrassed if you really do believe it literally – millions of others do too. Thank you.

Q. 2. Do you believe that Adam and Eve were actual human individuals, who had no earthly parents; and that eating the forbidden fruit was the primary cause of all that is wrong in the world?

OK, thank you. Then what *do* we make of those opening chapters of Genesis? For myself, I'd always enjoyed them and I loved their portrayals in paintings and music, but before I had done any Biblical studies they weren't much more to me than a picturesque bit of cultural background. And as for their meaning: well, pinning all the world's troubles on one human error felt dangerously misleading. However, once I'd been shown how the creation stories of Genesis 1, and of 2 onwards, are *different* accounts: different in style, vocabulary, starting points, assumptions, order of events; different names for God, different messages, and each with its different parallels in the rest of the ancient world but each with its unique features, some incompatible with each other ... set free *by the texts themselves* from having to pretend that they're scientific history, I could then be open to what they are – *myths*. *Not* in the sense of 'untrue'; powerful myths in the manner of the great Greek myths, or the best of Shakespeare – the particulars in a story conveying universal truths – truths for which prosaically factual language is generally inadequate. (We don't think less of Hamlet or King Lear because they are not factual history.)

So then I found it possible to start delving into the many layers of meaning in the myths – layers not just to satisfy the enquiring mind, and to enlarge our vision. For a start, that vision of the beautiful, terrifying majesty of the created universe, whose actual origin is still mysterious. (The theory of everything stays just round the corner. And to ask 'what was before the Big Bang' may not, after all, be meaningless.) Significantly, the first two

verses of Genesis do not make it clear whether or not there was already anything there when God's creative word was spoken. The dogma of creation *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, was a philosophical notion from another time and culture. But from these different chapters we get a vision of a God who is both *Transcendent* (beyond things and beings and space and time), yet also *Immanent*, (present among us, walking in the garden and calling us by name, and whose image is indelibly within us).

As for Adam and Eve, that dark shadow of 'original sin' as something like a faulty gene spoiling everything after – that is not in the text, nor in Jewish understanding of it, but is an invention of the early Christians. Instead, we can find our own problems and possibilities these archetypal figures. Adam, 'Man', made from dust of the earth, Everyman; and Eve, the universal Mother. They demonstrate our need for exploring curiosity, and its dangers; our adolescent need to rebel; our growth into self-consciousness, and sexuality, and shame – and blame. We can discover the ambivalence of the snake image, who is not actually 'the devil' in this story, but takes on the many-sided symbolism in the mythology of the ancient world. We find the puzzle of whether God really wants humans to be perfect – perfectly obedient; or to be 'in his own image' – having freedom, which includes freedom 'to know good and evil, to be like gods,' and to obey God from love, not from necessity. Long tradition has recognized the blurred boundaries in that tasting of the forbidden fruit: the 'sin of Eve – and Adam' was also the 'blessed fault'.

I have concentrated so much on this one example, partly because its long shadow (and its light) reach every part of the whole Bible. And also, I hope, to give a flavour of why it is so important to *study* the Bible, as well as simply hearing or reading bits of it. Not just for our intellectual curiosity, but to uncover the riches that will touch our hearts and light up our way. [That brings up my third question: how many people have used a Bible commentary in the last year?] Now, you won't find every paperback commentary going into all of the issues that I have so superficially hinted at, but they are a useful start. Really, much the best way is group Bible study, where different insights can be shared and – most important – people can bring their own questions, and doubts, and hopes.

There is a Great Biblical Epic, and an overview and connecting the parts of the whole are illuminating. But a casual stroll through just the *narrative* can be very misleading. Stories are an essential part of Jewish tradition, and Bible authors, Rabbis, and Jesus with his parables, told stories to convey meanings behind the narrative. You had to 'get it', to let the penny drop, to let the meaning come to you in the way that means most to you.

We're not about to set up group Bible studies, but I hope those who take up the chance of the Pilgrim course will find plenty of these elements in it. The other day I heard a talk by the biblical theologian and prolific writer Tom Wright. He gave a novel twist to a familiar quote about an unexamined life being not worth living: '*The unexamined Bible is not worth reading*'. I wouldn't go that far, but I think we can take the point.

*Harold Stringer*