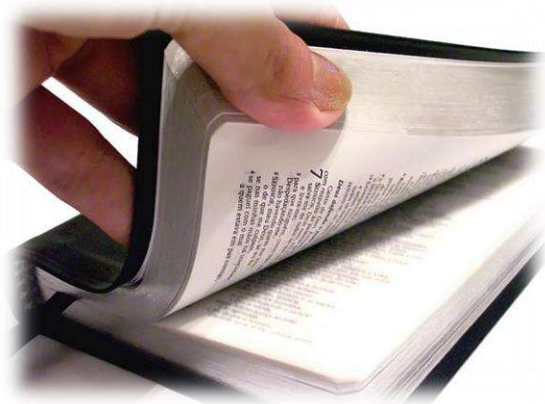


Open with care!



Reading the Bible thoughtfully

Lent 2015

by Revd Anne Le Bas

Introduction

The Bible is probably one of the most influential books in the world. Many people treasure it and find in it the wisdom and life of God for their lives. We recall exciting stories we learned as children, and we cling to favourite passages in difficult times. As well as shaping our individual lives, the Bible has also shaped our societies through its teaching. This has often been a good thing. Its call to live justly and lovingly has challenged the abuse of power and given protection and dignity to the poor and voiceless. Campaigners against the slave trade found in it a message that proclaimed that all people were children of God, and therefore equal in worth to everyone else, for example.

But throughout history the Bible has also been misused to support violence and discrimination. The gory conquests recorded in the Old Testament, apparently supported by God, have legitimised warfare against those perceived to be standing in the way of the spread of Christendom. Attitudes to gender, sexuality and disability, which Bible writers took for granted, now seem out-dated and cruel, limiting people's ability to live their lives fully. Many people who reject Christian faith highlight the Bible as one of their problems. As Richard Dawkins put it, *"Do those people who hold up the Bible as an inspiration to moral rectitude have the slightest notion of what is actually written in it?"* *The God Delusion*

How can we, as Christians, make sure that we are reading the Bible thoughtfully, not plucking verses from it out of context, but appreciating it for what it is, the record of many people's thoughts about, and struggles with, faith, life and God?

In this Lent Course, we will try to build up an overview of the Bible, seeing how the various bits of it fit together, where, how and why it was written. We will think about the cultures it was born from and ask how those who wrote it resembled or differed from us. In session 3 we will look at some of the tricky issues it throws up for us, and in the final session we will think about how we might read it today, and look at various approaches to Bible reading that we might be able to build into our daily lives.

SESSION 1

Getting to grips with the Bible

The Bible is a big book, or rather a collection of books. There are 66 in total, not including the Apocrypha (more of that later). They were written over a period of at least 600 years, and possibly much longer than that, and they weren't organised into the form we now know until well into the Christian era, and then only with a great deal of argument. Which of the many books people looked to as containing Jewish and Christian wisdom were worthy of a place? Which should be left out? These questions were settled in a number of ways; wide acceptance by generations of Christians in different parts of the church, consistency of message with other writings that were felt to be authoritative

The book we now have is the fruit of that long process of testing. For most people, over most of history, though, the written words of the Bible were (literally) a closed book. Most people couldn't read. They experienced the Bible by hearing it read, usually in worship. That inevitably meant they heard it in short chunks, just as we do today.

- **Where did you first hear or read the Bible, or have Bible stories told or read to you?**
- **Did you have a Bible or a book of Bible stories as a child?**
- **Can you remember what you thought of the Bible then?**
- **Are there any parts of the Bible that have had a particular effect on you, or of which you are particularly fond?**

These days many people have little or no experience either of hearing or of reading the Bible and grow up with only the haziest notion of what it might contain. They may not even have an accurate idea of the most famous Bible stories, like the birth of Jesus, relying on school nativity plays and Christmas cards for their mental pictures of what happened. In a sense, then, each of us probably carries around our own personal Bible in our heads, made up of whatever we have managed to pick up over the years.

- **If we had to reconstruct the Bible from what we know, what stories would we recall?**
- **Can we put those stories in any kind of order? (*stick Bible stories into groups of writings – flip chart paper on walls?*)**
- **Why do we remember the bits we remember?**
- **If you had to come up with a summary of what you think the “message” of the Bible is, what would you say?**

It is sometimes said that the Bible is like a play with five acts, of which the last one is unwritten

Act 1: God’s loving creation

Act 2: How it all went wrong and what happened next

Act 3: Jesus’ rescue mission

Act 4; The Church and its message

Act 5: Our response to God as his Word takes root in our lives.

Read:

Psalms 119: Your word is a light to my feet and a lamp to my path

Hebrews 4.12:

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Luke 4.16-21 Jesus in the synagogue

John 1. 1In the beginning was the Word

Colossians 3.16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.

Deuteronomy 10.16-17 Bind them on your foreheads

Matthew 5.17- 19 you have heard it said, but I say to you...

How do you encounter the Bible in your daily life? Just on Sundays in Church, or at other times and in other ways?

Do you read it for yourself?

If not, why not?

What gets in the way of us reading the Bible?

SESSION 2

PEOPLE LIKE US?

The Bible is an ancient book, and yet Christians believe that God still speaks to us today through it. Hearing that message can be hard, though, because we are so far away in time and space from those who first wrote and heard the words of the Bible.

There are two equal and opposite temptations we may fall into when reading the Bible.

The first is to assume that the people we find in it are the same as we are, to assume that they think and behave as we would, except that they wear different clothes and speak another language.

If we think this, we may be shocked when we encounter attitudes and behaviour in the Bible that would be offensive to us today; slavery, racism, misogyny, homophobia and the apparently unquestioned acceptance of violence. Worse still, we may think that if these can be found in the Bible they are somehow all right, and the will of God.

The second temptation is to assume that they are utterly different, and therefore we can't really learn anything from their lives. Critics of Christian faith often ask why anyone should think it worthwhile to pay any attention to words written in Bronze or Iron Age cultures. What can they possibly have to say to us today? This kind of attitude can also be found among devout Christians though, who may see the heroes and heroines of the Bible as somehow made of different stuff to the rest of us, and therefore miss the message that God cares about ordinary, fallible human beings.

In this session we will be looking at the kind of societies that the people who wrote and first read the Bible were part of, and the cultures that shaped them.

We will be backing this up with a trip to the British Museum to get a first hand look at some of those cultures. In doing so, I hope we will be helped both to see the common humanity we share with the cultures of the Bible, but also the ways in which they thought and behaved differently from us.

- **Which of the two temptations above do you think you are most likely to fall into? Do you tend to think of Biblical people as like or unlike you?**

READ:

2 Samuel 12.19b - 25

1 Corinthians 11.2-16

- **How are the people in these passages like us or different from us?**

WHAT KIND OF CULTURES INFLUENCED THE BIBLE WRITERS?

Sumerians (4300 – 2334 BC) and Akkadians (2334 -2004 BC)

Ancient inhabitants of Mesopotamia – the earliest civilisations. Abraham came from the Sumerian city of Ur. (Genesis 11.31)

Canaanites, Edomites, Moabites and others

Tribes already living in or near the land which became Israel. Israelites are often at war with these tribes. The Moabites and Ammonites were said to be descended from the daughters of Lot, who tricked their father into sleeping with them because they thought they wouldn't find husbands. (Genesis 19. 38)

The Phoenicians were descended from the Canaanites, and became great sea-farers, living in the sea ports of Tyre and Sidon. They invented the first alphabet.

Egyptians (3100 – 332BC)

Egypt is a significant power throughout Biblical history, but impinges on the story most in the Books of Genesis and Exodus. Joseph is sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers. They eventually join him there. (Genesis 46.1-7) Moses grows up in Egypt 400 years later and leads the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt and back to Canaan, which eventually becomes Israel. (Exodus 3.30)

Judah (1200 – 587 BC) and Israel (1200 – 721 BC)

The Hebrew slaves settle in Canaan, which they regard as their Promised Land, and eventually conquer many of the local tribes, like those in the city of Jericho (Joshua 6) They are ruled by judges until they demand a king (1 Samuel 8). The prophet Samuel reluctantly anoints Saul as King (c. 1020 BC), but when he doesn't turn out to be a very good king, anoints David the shepherd boy as his successor (c.1006 BC). 1 Samuel 9-10 & 1 Samuel 16) David is succeeded by his son, Solomon (c.965 BC).(1 Kings 2.10) After Solomon there is a civil war and the nation divides into a Northern kingdom, called Israel, with its capital at Samaria, and a Southern Kingdom, called Judah, with its capital at Jerusalem. (1 King 12)

Philistines

A tribe which arrives on the coast of Israel at around 1200 BC. It is one of many tribes which arrive in the Middle East as the result of a great wave of migration which seems to come from the Western Mediterranean of what are called by archaeologists "The Sea People". One tribe of these is called the "Peleset" in ancient writings, and is known to us as the Philistines. These are the enemies of King David and other early kings and leaders. Goliath is a Philistine. (1 Samuel 17)

Assyrians

The Assyrians come from Northern Mesopotamia. Their capital is at Ninevah. They defeat the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 and scatter the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom around their kingdom. (2 Kings 17) These tribes never return in any numbers. The story of Jonah is set in Ninevah, where Jonah is sent to preach to the Ninevites. (The story was written, however, long after the time of the Assyrian empire.)

Babylonians

The Babylonians come from Southern Mesopotamia. They defeat the Assyrians in 609 BC. (2 Kings 25) They besiege Jerusalem in 587 BC and eventually destroy it, taking most of the population into slavery in Babylon.

Persians

King Cyrus of Persia defeated the Babylonians in 539 BC. He sent the exiles home to their own lands, and seems to have provided support for

them to rebuild their nations. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell of the return and rebuilding of Jerusalem.

Greeks

Alexander the Great (20/21 July 356 – 10/11 June 323 BC) defeats the Persians, in 332 BC and (briefly) rules an empire which stretches from his homeland in Macedonia (north of Greece) to the borders of India, and southwards into Egypt. He dies at the age of 33, and his empire is then divided into four blocks. The land of Israel falls under the rule of the Seleucid dynasty, which ruled from Mesopotamia. The successors of Alexander throughout his former empire were very influenced by Greek customs and learning, however. They are known as “Hellenistic” – the Greeks called themselves “Hellenes”. During this period there were many ex-pat Jewish communities around the Mediterranean and the Middle East, which developed a much more “hellenistic” flavour of Judaism, influenced by Greek philosophy.

Judah gradually becomes independent and is ruled by their own kings, the Hasmonean dynasty, though the Seleucids still have a lot of influence over them. The stories in the books of Maccabees, in the Apocrypha (which isn't included in all bibles) come from this period.

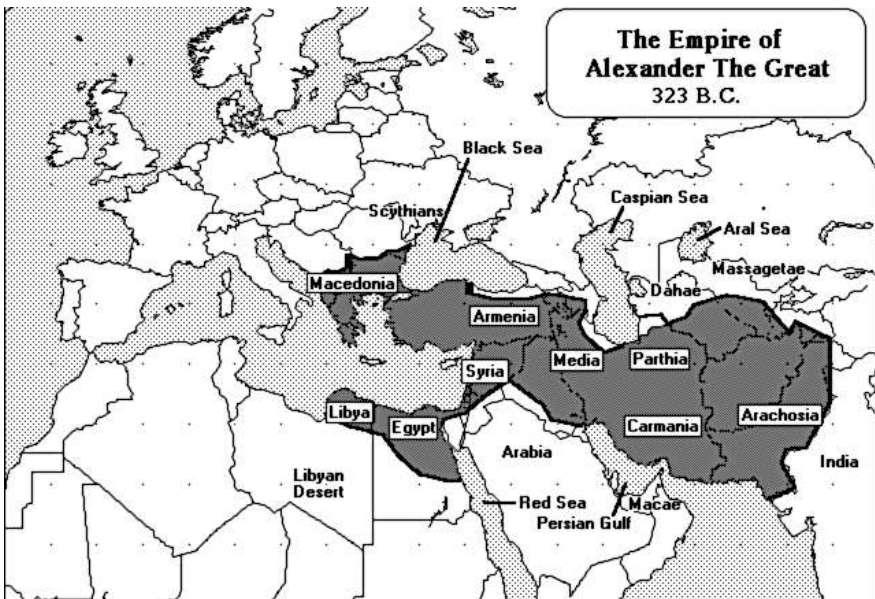
Romans

The Seleucid empire is defeated by the Roman general Pompey in 63 BC. The Romans give Israel a limited amount of self-rule, under the rule of the Herodian dynasty, but it is a client nation, essentially under the rule of Rome and occupied by Roman soldiers. By the time of the death of Christ the southern part of the nation, the area around Jerusalem called Judea, is ruled directly from Rome by the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate. Although the rulers of the Empire are Roman, however, Greek ways of thinking, and Greek language still prevail, which is why the New Testament is written in Greek and not in Latin.

Map of Ancient Near East



http://www.bible-history.com/geography/maps/map_ancient_near_east.html





MAP 3 The Roman empire in AD 14 at the death of Augustus: imperial provinces are in roman capital letters; senatorial provinces are in italic capital letters

- If you were Jewish and this was your history, how would you feel about it?
- What would you think about God, who had told you to settle in the Promised Land?
- How do you think that the Jewish people managed to hang on to their identity so stubbornly through all these conquests?

SESSION 3 THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD?

This session will look at some of the thorny issues which often pose problems for people as they try to read the Bible. It will include the three sections below, but we will also gather any questions that members of the group want to ask.

- **Have you encountered barriers in reading the Bible because of some of the content of it?**
- **Richard Dawkins said: “Do those people who hold up the Bible as an inspiration to moral rectitude have the slightest notion of what is actually written in it?” Do you think he has a justifiable point?**

There are a number of approaches we can take to passages which seem to us to be impossible or unpalatable.

1. We can simply discount the Bible entirely as a document worthy of looking to for guidance. (The Dawkins approach)
2. We can simply accept everything in the Bible as literally true and follow it to the letter.
3. We can try to “explain away” the problems, by saying that the passage doesn’t in fact say what it appears to say, or that there must be another explanation for what it says.
4. We can “cherry pick” the bits of the Bible we like and reject the rest. (In a sense this was what the early Church did when it first compiled its “canon” of scripture. There were many books which they decided not to include.)
5. We can let the passages stand as they are, as a record of what people at the time said and thought about those issues, and try to listen to what God might be saying to us through them, but not regard it as obligatory for us to share the viewpoint of those who originally wrote the Bible.
 - **What might be the pros and cons of each of these approaches?**
 - **Which one fits best the way that you read the Bible?**

SOME ISSUES TO CONSIDER

SEX, VIOLENCE AND THE WRATH OF GOD

Joshua 11.16-23.

Revelation 21.1-9

Judges 21.15-25

- **How can we make sense of these sort of passages?**
- **Does it make a difference whether they are in the Old or New Testament?**

DID IT REALLY HAPPEN?

Numbers 22.

Matthew 2.1-12

- **How much does it matter to you whether the Bible is historically true in the sense that we would expect of history today?**

WHAT ABOUT MIRACLES?

Mark 6.45-52

- **Do we need to believe that the miracles of the Bible happened as they are written? Should we try to explain them, or explain them away? Should we just miss them out...?**

ANY OTHER QUESTIONS?

- **Some traditions say “Hear the Word of the Lord” rather than “This is the Word of the Lord” after Bible readings in church. Do you think this would be better?**
- **What does it mean to you to say that we can hear the voice of God through the Bible? Are there any times when this has happened to you?**

SESSION 4 READING THE BIBLE TODAY

Ways to read the Bible

Potluck...! All group to shut eyes, open at random and put their finger on a verse – read out...

Literary and historically critical reading – reading for facts or reading the Bible as a literary work.

Devotional reading

Lectio Divina Ps 130

Imaginative reading Matt 14.13-21

Reading with the Head, the Heart and the Hands.

When and how to read
patterns – daily reading
apps

Bible study notes

Lectionary