

Bible Sunday 2019: 27th October 2019
Jeremiah 36: 9 - 32; Romans 10: 5 – 17

Well, I take my hat off to anyone who would ever dare to read a Bible reading like this evening's Old Testament lesson in public. Not one to be embarked upon unless you're absolutely sure your dentures are firmly secured. It begs the question: what on earth are we doing traipsing into Evensong week in week out to read out long lists of what to us are strange sounding names from a far-away culture in a far-way place at a far-away time?

Today we're keeping Bible Sunday, so it's a good time to be addressing that question and to be thinking about how we do use the Bible. We use it with the benefit of all sorts of different academic disciplines: redaction criticism, historical criticism, literary criticism, rhetorical criticism, canonical criticism and all sorts of other academic schools of criticism you might want to pull out of the bag. We use the Bible

with the benefit of different interpretative ways of reading it: we might have a feminist reading, or a black reading, or a queer reading.

Sitting at home, though, trying to work out our everyday faith, with our Bible sitting on its shelf beside us, we probably are not aware of any of this. We just want – or at least we ought to want – just to read the Bible. We want to open up our Bibles and do some plain reading to get the plain meaning from the page. That would be a lovely idea: but it can't be done. Whether we are aware of it or not, there are different ways of reading the Bible, different approaches to adopt.

Someone once said – and I can't claim any credit for thinking this up, because I've no idea where I got it from – that you could say there are three models of how we can read the Bible. And like all people who think up models, they managed to give each one a name that begins with the same letter of the alphabet.

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So we have the three Ps – not garden pea, mushy pea and processed pea, but Precept, Principle and Paradigm. Do you read the Bible as precept, as principle or as paradigm?

The answer is that nobody reads it exclusively precept, principle or paradigm. We all read it as a bit of all three, but the point of creating a model is that it creates a distorted example to help us recognise when we are doing each.

So, reading the Bible as precept means to read it as a book of rules that can simply be lifted off the page and applied directly to the world as we find it. the problem is that actually the Bible has very little to say directly about the social and ethical issues we face today and it can be very dangerous to pretend it does. It used to break my heart as a university chaplain to hear hot-headed young Christians describe the Bible as their rule book and then snatch a proof text, lob it at somebody and see people get hurt in the process.

We probably all agree - sophisticated, intelligent people that we are - that the Bible is far too complex to be used in this way; and that we need to be sensitive to the context in which it was written . . . until it just proves convenient to bash somebody over the head with a proof text: “Aha, Mark chapter 18, verse 41,” we say “QED.” We all do it. (By the way, I do know there’s no such verse as Mark 18: 41: that’s why I said it, as a stupid example.) But we all do it. And we need to be aware that we do it; and be careful about how we do it.

So much for precept. Trying to find a principle from within a Bible passage is probably what most people do week in week out standing in this pulpit. We take seriously that the Bible was written in a particular context, so we’re sensitive to that: we strip away all the particular context and we try to find at the heart of it a kernel of theological principle; or you might say, we boil off all the context, to be left with a pure distillation of an abstract proposition about God that

we can then apply to the context in which we actually find ourselves.

The problem is, though, that God is never an abstract theological proposition. The Bible is a hopelessly unsystematic set of documents. And that's because God is always particular. He's particular about you and he's particular about me. And the Bible is the record of God's particular involvement with the messy, serendipity, incoherence of the lives of particular people at a particular time. That means that to any systematic, efficient, modern mind the Bible can be infuriatingly messy, serendipity and incoherent. But that is simply the measure of the particularity of God's concern. And we reduce God to an abstract principle at our peril.

Which leaves us with paradigm. We've done precept; we've done principle; and now we've got reading the Bible as paradigm left. That's when you look at the Bible as a whole and you try to find an overarching

theme that sums it all up and which then can inform how you live your life. There are two problems with this. The first is that it begs the question of who can presume to have the authority to say what the overarching theme is – it's all far too subjective. And the second is that it reduces the Bible to a level of simplicity that becomes frankly naff: it's all about love, init. Well, I suppose it is all about love. Nobody can argue it isn't. But it doesn't do much justice to the richness of the Bible or help us to navigate the complexities of life as we find it.

Still, we can take some precept, principle and paradigm to Jeremiah 36 and apply them to where we're at. Research published by Cardiff University this week has found that the majority of British people – whether they are Remainers or Leavers – think that violence against MPs is justified in order to get the solution to Brexit that they want. I'll say that again, just to let it sink in: the majority of British people – whether they are Remainers or Leavers – think that

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violence against MPs is justified in order to get the solution to Brexit that they want.

The principle to be distilled from Jeremiah 36 is that people of God are called to exercise a prophetic ministry; to speak truth unto power, just as Jeremiah did to King Jehoiakim, and keep on saying it even if we feel our words are just being thrown on the fire; to say clearly – as the Archbishop of Canterbury has today – that there must be a de-escalation of dangerous and hateful language, that it is unacceptable to call people traitor or fascist or to dismiss fears of violence against women MPs as humbug.

The paradigm is that we believe the overarching message of the Bible is that God has redeemed the world – not just those who call themselves saved and think they've got a ticket for heaven – but that there is a new world coming, formed by God's redemptive love where there is no violence or hatred or bitterness; and

that we are called to anticipate that new order by enacting its values in the here and now.

And the Biblical precept is simply this: we need to love our neighbours as ourselves.

Amen.