

What's good about the Bible?

There are hundreds of millions of people in the world today who simply would not understand why we should ask such a question. To them copies of the Bible are more precious than gold. It brings light and joy and hope into their lives. It liberates them from age-old fears and superstitions. For many millions the saddest thing is that the Bible has not yet been translated into their language; and when a version finally appears in a new tongue demand far outstrips supply. But there is no need to go to the remote parts of Africa or Asia or South America to find people for whom the Bible is the most precious thing this world affords. They are here in our own country, in scores of different Christian bodies, in this audience tonight (and indeed on this platform) and even in other faiths. After all, what we call the Old Testament is in fact the Jewish Bible. For a huge host of people of varying cultures and backgrounds, literate and illiterate, simple and sophisticated, the Bible brings the definitive Good News, the truth about God.

But you know and I know that there are many who take quite a different view. They point out that the Bible's picture of the universe is hopelessly out of date, that its historical details are 'often inaccurate'. Many of its claims for God are unbelievable in the light of experience; and if some of its stories about God were really true, then God, far from being holy and good would be a monster. Nor are these criticisms voiced simply by ignorant or ill-informed opponents of religion. If we are fair, there is plenty of material in the Bible which seems to justify them; and there are many in our congregations who are deeply and reasonably worried by this, and who find such attacks difficult to counter. Many of our fellow Christians, in fact, are hanging on to their faith despite the Bible, not because of it.

Let us just remind ourselves of a few examples, beginning with one not often mentioned in this connection, one of the best known of all Bible stories: Noah's ark. I am thinking not of the practical impossibility of the tale, so much as its appalling immorality. We are all brainwashed by the children's toy version. Shake free from that, and it is simply horrific. The terror of people drowning as the remorseless rains go on and on, parents defeated in their last desperate efforts to save their children - we saw but a glimpse of that in the horror of the tsunami. Nor, according to the biblical account, was it just human beings who were destroyed. All the animals, who could not possibly have committed any sins, were apparently wiped out except the handful in the ark. And this, we are told, was not just an unavoidable natural disaster but something deliberately

engineered by God, because the human race was wicked, and God decided to scrub it out. Ah, you may say, but it didn't really happen; it's a legend. Yes, but a legend which depicts what they thought God was like. Is that what we think God is like?

And that's not the only example by a long way. At Evensong on Easter Day every third year we read the story of God drowning Pharaoh's army and its horses in the Red Sea. There are possible alternatives, but the small print of the Lectionary for that year says that whatever else is left out we must read that. In Joshua, Judges and 1 Samuel we come across the sacred institution of the ban, the practice of destroying at God's command every living thing, human or animal, in an enemy nation. In 1 Samuel God deposes Saul from being king because Saul did not completely carry out a ban decreed on the Amalekite nation as a punishment for their ancestors' hostility to Israel hundreds of years before. On a smaller scale we have the story of the man who broke the Sabbath by collecting firewood. God, when asked for guidance, decreed that he should be stoned to death.

Some try to resolve the problem of such passages by saying that that was the Old Testament, which does not have the authority of the New. This solution goes back a long way, to the 2nd century indeed, when it was part of the teaching of Marcion, whose breakaway sect was for a time extremely popular, and who rejected the OT completely, saying that the God of the OT was an inferior creator deity, not the Father of Jesus - an idea taken up long afterwards by William Blake. In modern times the OT was thrown out by the German State Church under Hitler, but that was because it was Jewish. But the bloodthirsty and implacable God of the kind of stories I have mentioned is not confined to the OT. If the last book in the Bible, the Revelation of John, were made into a film it would be the biggest horror movie of all time. And it is in the Gospel of Matthew that we find repeated emphasis on the punishment of unrepentant sinners in eternal flames, one of the features of traditional Christianity that non-believers find most repellent.

In any case it would be both untrue and unfair to suggest that the OT consisted entirely of questionable material. Some of the loveliest prayers' and praises are there, and some of the highest ethical teaching. Where, for instance, does 'love your neighbour as yourself' come from? Leviticus. So does another verse, which a great Jewish biblical scholar once said 'knocked *Love your neighbour* into a cocked hat'. The word 'neighbour' in the Jewish Law meant a fellow Jew; but Leviticus 19.34 bids us love not just our neighbour but 'the resident alien' as ourselves, and it is hard to think of any command we need more just at the moment. Then there are the great passages in the Prophets on social justice, and in Job and Ecclesiastes some of the bravest, most honest and most profound reflection on the tragic side of human life there has ever been.

All the way through you can find treasure in the Bible. The problem is: how do we deal with the dross? I suggest that one method which won't do is trying to explain

away each tricky bit on its own. For one thing it puts you on the defensive, and gives the impression that there are far more bad bits than good. But, in any case, if you are trying - as we are - to present the Bible as a whole as sacred Scripture, then it's no good totting up the marks it gets on every individual question to see whether in the end it scores an A grade or a B or whatever. What we need is a clear, overall idea of what the Bible is, what primary purpose it serves, so that we don't criticise it for not being what it never could be, or ask it questions it is not intended to answer.

So, what is the Bible? Look at it objectively, and the answer is fairly straightforward: It is a collection of many kinds of document from a period of roughly 1300 years, that is, from, say, 1200 BC to 100 AD. We have histories, laws, popular wisdom in the form of proverbs, hymns, work songs, love poetry, folk tales, genealogies, legends of heroes, moral teaching, charismatic prophecies, theological speculation, guidance for running small faith communities, and four examples of that unique literary form, the Gospels. Of all these writings we know the names of some of the authors; but a great deal is anonymous. We cannot say with certainty even how many hands have been at work, because it is clear that often many have contributed in smaller or larger ways to the final result, and over a considerable period.

There are two things which bind these assorted writings together. First, all the documents spring from one human community, the one we know as Israel, during the course of its varied and dramatic development down the centuries. Secondly, all are concerned, from many different angles, with God and his plan for Israel and the world.

We have a word for a collection of this kind. It is an **archive**. An archive in your County Record Office may contain a great variety of documents thrown up by human life over many centuries; but it is united by the fact that that life has been the story of one region and its people. So it is with the Bible. Israel possessed and treasured a consciousness of belonging together, both through kinship, and through a bond with the land of Palestine, a bond which is still one of the most powerful factors in the tragedy of the Middle East today. Certainly Israel was at first a semi-nomadic, migrant people. Over time it absorbed elements from other sources, just as Britain has done. Certainly too its members were later scattered over much of the known world, and have continued to be *so*, with tragic and unjust results for them. But nothing has been able to disrupt that sense of belonging, of community; and we must never forget that what shaped the Christian church in its earliest days was the fact that it began within this community of Israel. The Church saw its own story as a continuation of the story of Israel, and its members, whether Jew or Gentile, as part of that story, even though, before long, Israel sadly no longer acknowledged them as its own. In Israel's experience, they believed, lay the key to God's plan for all humankind; and the NT is testimony from those who saw themselves as caught up in great turning-point of that plan.

The Bible, however, is not a single, comprehensive official treatise on that story. Whether Old Testament or New, its contents reflect the way particular individuals saw God's action and tried to make sense of it at particular times. That is why, so far as history is concerned, in the first five books of the Bible, from Genesis to Deuteronomy, for instance, or in Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, or supremely in the Four Gospels, you have competing accounts of the same events. In the Wisdom literature - Proverbs, Job and such - you find strongly divergent views on some of the deepest problems for religious faith. Even in the Law there are differing rulings, which in later times Rabbis had to resolve. But all this is only what one would expect from intelligent and passionately concerned thinkers from different periods and backgrounds. In the NT we all know how St Paul and the writer of the Epistle of James differed profoundly over the relation between belief and conduct in Christian life and hope. Paul, John and the writer to the Hebrews all have their own angles on the mystery of who and what Jesus was; while supremely it is the four Gospels which give variant accounts of the same subject matter.

What is distressing is that some Christians find this a problem. For them, any book which is truly 'the Word of God' must be an anthology of infallible statements which the writers have been inspired by God to record. But instead of having theories about what the Bible ought to be, and how it ought to work, why do we not let the Bible speak for itself? If it is 'the Word of God', then presumably God knew best how he wanted that Word conveyed: and the Bible has some very clear and important guidance for us on this matter.

In the first place it tells us that God takes history very seriously indeed, and so should we. The Bible is the story of how God took what was, to human eyes, a very unpromising lot of people, and over centuries turned them into a nation in whom he himself, in the Person of his Son, could share our human nature and condition. So, when you look at the barbarous, murdering horde from the desert who on God's orders massacred everything in Jericho and terrorised all the inhabitants of Canaan, you don't read that as if it were a recommendation for Christian politicians today. You must read it as the gripping start of an almost incredible story of how God, can take such material and turn it into a society whose culture and ethics were admired by many of the noblest spirits in the ancient world a thousand years later. There will be insights along the way which have valuable meaning for us today, but there will also be ideas which are morally and spiritually mistaken, because that was where the people who had them were at that time. If someone had got up and preached the Sermon on the Mount to them, they would not have had the foggiest notion of what he was - talking about. What is miraculous is that at every stage what they had grasped was enough to move them on; and it is of great spiritual import to us to realise that this is how God worked the miracle. God is revealed not just in words but in the process, in the story.

Even more important is it, then, that the Bible gives us no grounds whatever for thinking that God's process, God's history, stopped with Jesus. Jesus said, you recall, 'the End is not yet.' We have no way of telling how far ahead he may have thought that end lay, but it doesn't really matter. We know how long it has taken so far. What we seem unable to grasp is that by revealing his purposes through history in the past God authorises us to learn more of his ways through the present and the future. Do not misunderstand me. The Cross and Resurrection did indeed mark out Jesus as the definitive key to this ongoing story, our unique window on to God. From then on all our thoughts, words and actions should have been compatible with that key if the world was to be led into all truth; and the real tragedy of history, and our deepest guilt as the Church, is that they have not been compatible with that key event. We Christians have constantly obstructed God in his attempts to advance his kingdom on this planet, which is one reason why in our day he has had so often to use secular humans as his prophets; and it is our refusal to be alive to what the Bible actually is which is the main cause of our blindness to this fact.

This is one fundamental reason why we must welcome what science has to tell us of God's world. To take, for example, the Genesis story of how the universe was made in six days (or six symbolic days, it matters not) as something to be believed in defiance of what science has been able to discover is not to honour the Bible; it is to fail to be true to its essential character. The famous saying, 'God has yet more light to break forth from his holy Word' is utterly true; but one of the main ways in which this happens is through doing what the people in the Bible did, taking one's experience of life and the world and seeking to combine it with one's understanding of God's character and purposes which, in our case, means what we have learned through Jesus.

The creation account in Genesis 1 is a quite amazing piece of religious imagination. When we remember that they had absolutely no solid information to go on, this picture of a cosmos emerging by stages, culminating in life, and written in the most majestic and economical language *is* an inspired achievement. Judging, as we must, from other cases in the biblical literature of Israel, the process of reasoning behind it was probably 'What must have happened to get the result we have' - which actually is not so far from scientific reasoning as we know it today. But do not forget that even so, Genesis also keeps an older attempt at the same thing, a story in which the focus is simply on earth, on the frontier between the wilderness and the cultivated zone, and the spaces of the heavens play no part. Yet that story too has its profound insights into the human condition, and the Bible simply puts them there side by side. How does God work? You need more than one story. Is that not what the Bible says to us over and over again? And you cannot use quotations from one story in isolation.

There is another major problem about the Bible which I must tackle before I conclude. Earlier on we looked at some of the individual passages in the Bible which cause people difficulty. But there is one fundamental theme running right

through the Bible which ought to trouble us more than any of these. This is the affirmation that if we are righteous and do God's will, God will hear our prayers and prosper and protect us. This is not just in the OT; it comes in the New as well. And it is manifestly untrue. Yet trying to make out that it is true has been responsible for more human misery and pastoral cruelty than almost any other teaching, for is it not cruel to tell those who have lost loved ones in some accident or catastrophe that it was 'God's will', or even that it is God's punishment of 'them or the one they have lost for some unacknowledged sin? (Oh yes, it does happen - not in your congregation, I'm sure, but it does.) Such talk is bound up with another assumption of much in the Bible that God does, as we would say today, 'micro-manage' everything that happens. To which all we can reply is that if he does, then he certainly is not Love, and is either amoral or actively wicked.

We need not feel impious for voicing this criticism, because it is there in the Bible itself. The great prophetic books Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, wrestle with it. So do some of the Psalms. Popular piety struggled with it after Jerusalem was sacked by the Babylonians in 586 BC and most of the population carried off into exile. Job and Ecclesiastes explore it with outstanding courage. Ecclesiastes in effect rejects the micro-management theory in favour of a very modern view that God simply holds the world in being and lets it behave according to its own laws. The book of Job takes a rather different radical line. Suppose God did protect all his favourite people, would not the result merely be that no one could ever choose to be good for its own sake? Would not human life be reduced to sheer self-interest? This is the essence of the challenge Satan lays down to God in the opening chapter. When God asks Satan if he will acknowledge Job as a model man, Satan simply replies 'Does Job serve God for nothing?' By protecting Job, and by implication any similar good people, God is creating an essentially non-moral world. Let him put Job to an extreme test, and see how his goodness stands up to that. Because the old folk story of Job demanded that the book have a happy ending, this idea is not pushed to the limit; but by implication it does in fact pull the rug out from under the conventional piety of the Law, and indeed of most of the biblical writings, posing a question which is not fully faced until Gethsemane, when the perfect man is abandoned by his Father to his fate.

I am not holding up Job as the answer to the perennial problem of evil and pain, which will never be resolved in this life. What I am saying is that the Bible positively authorises us to live with such unanswered questions, and not to resort to obvious untruths in a misguided attempt to protect the faith. The majority biblical view of God's Providence simply will not stand up; but may it not be true that no one could see that, until we knew far more about the workings of the universe that they did? In that sense the Bible positively demands, that we move on from where they were, and we ought to consider ourselves lucky that we have the knowledge to do so.

What's good about the Bible? Let me conclude by trying to sum up very briefly the main points of the answer I have been trying to give.

What's good about the Bible is, first and foremost, that it does **not** claim to be either a final compendium of answers to all questions of faith or a complete and infallible handbook of moral and spiritual guidance. Nor does it say that the way to get such answers or to find such guidance is to confine yourself to studying and expounding the sacred text. You need more material, first and foremost your own honest experience. Then, just as some of the biblical writers drew on the ideas of other cultures and other faiths, judaising or christianising them to enlarge their vision of God and his world, so we must draw on the wisdom and discoveries of scientists, historians, psychologists, sociologists, and philosophers, learning from them to see ever deeper and more comprehensively into the glory of the God we have found in Christ. And indeed this is what the Christian Church has always done in its theology and ethics, its forms of worship, its creeds and its catechisms. Where we have often made mistakes is in treating our pronouncements as final and complete statements, which other people, have to accept if they are to be recognised as true Christians.

What makes us Christian is that we recognise the Bible story as our authoritative clue to God's saving work in the world, and that we therefore try, in the Spirit of God, to live our own lives as a part and continuation of that story. Other people may start from the same point, but work things out rather differently. If they do, then the richness of voices and vocations in the Bible itself should help us to recognise them as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The very fact, to which we referred earlier, that hundreds of hands have been involved in the creation of the Bible, the overwhelming majority unknown to us save by the traces they have left in the sacred text, breathes the same message. St Paul crystallised it in his immortal image of the Body of Christ. The Church is not a community of clones, and it could not do the work of the Kingdom if it were. Nor could the Bible have been our unique and irreplaceable witness to God's story if only one person in one society at one time had written it. It is the inconsistencies, the quarrels even, in the Bible that make it light to our minds, food for our hearts, God's access to our souls. The Bible is 'Word of God' not by being a collection of infallible, timeless statements, which human language can never provide, but by being the voice of other pilgrims like ourselves, who can say 'I was there ,when God passed by, and I know.'