

ALL SCRIPTURE?

If you were to ask people to name a key verse in the Bible, I imagine a lot of people would say John 3:16.

Today our reading isn't John 3:16.

Instead, we've got 2 Timothy 3:16 and that turns out for other reasons to be another significant verse.

Just before the year 2000 the then Episcopal Bishop of Edinburgh, Richard Holloway, wrote a book called *Godless Morality*.

Now Richard was used to writing books and having plenty of controversial opinions to share (especially as he grew older), and the very title of this book ensured that there were people who were against it before reading a word. But I think that the basic premise of the book was quite obvious and self-evident to anyone paying proper attention.

His argument was that if we are going to have debate as to what constitutes morality with the rest of society then there isn't much point in Christians talking about God or the Bible.

Its fine for **us** to live the way we do because we believe in God or we agree with something that is scripture – that's fine, but we cant expect non-christians to take that line.

If we say "*God has said this*" or "*God has said that*", this will not be persuasive to people who don't believe in God.

If we say "*The Bible says this (or that)*", that won't cut much ice for people for whom the Bible has no importance.

People who don't believe in God or who don't read the Bible are unlikely to look to God or scripture when forming their opinions about morality.

Think about it. If a Muslim comes up to us and she says "*It's Ramadan and a time for fasting*", we would probably say, "*Fair enough – on you go then,*" but we don't feel we have got to join her and do that ourselves.

People are free to follow a religious path but everyone else doesn't have to copy them.

In other words, what Holloway is saying that when we are thinking about the whole of society and working out with the vast mass of people in society what is moral behaviour we need to find common ground.

We need to argue with reason and intelligence and common sense to find acceptable standards.

No use in arguing from God or from the Bible against non-Christians on this subject.

Now of course there are many reasons why people don't spend time reading the Bible.

Usually even physically its not a very attractive book, often laid out with very small print.

There are huge parts of it that are unintelligible or irrelevant to modern readers, and some of the stories seem impossible to take literally.

There are also (in among all the beautiful ideas and words) some pretty horrific words and incidents. To balance the wonderful depictions of God there are some pretty negative pictures that seem both frightening and contradictory.

And one thing that many people struggle with, is when, in the middle of a debate or discussion with a Christian person, the Christian suddenly smiles and relates or even reads out a Bible verse.

That verse trumps everything that the non-Christian said, because the Bible is true in everything it says. Whatever is written in the Bible has the last word.

People are probably not puzzled with the idea that the Bible is special to Christians and a source of religious guidance and support, but they *are* puzzled and bemused when Christians say that it is, in fact, inerrant – true in every way and inspired by God at every sentence.

Despite the fact that the Bible is an ancient collection of books written literally thousands of years ago, and that there are no original copies of any of the books, and what scholars have to translate into the Bibles we have in our hands are actually copies of copies – despite this fact – the Bible is without error in everything it says, and every part of it – every single word of it – is inspired.

People struggle with that.

And so do I.

Where does this idea come from?

2 Timothy 3:16.

The Bible says so in 2 Timothy 3:16.

Now the trouble is that the Bible telling the world it is totally inspired and trustworthy – even if it is – it's a circular argument.

How do we know that Bible is totally inspired? Because the Bible says it is!

Suppose you produce some book and say,

"This is the greatest book in the world."

And if someone doubts the claim you reply,

"I can prove it is. On page 138 this book says it is the greatest book in the world.

So if it says so then it must be true."

That's not really much of an argument!

Now some Christians do this with the Bible – saying that every part is as inspired and as important as every other.

Where does this come from? 2 Timothy 3:16.

How do we know that all scripture is inspired by God?

Because scripture says it is!

Now you can understand why we might wish that were so.

There's a great desire for certainty and simple answers to all questions and an equally great desire for no pressure to have to think things through and wrestle too much.

That's why we humans like the idea of an infallible church or an infallible Pope or an infallible Bible. It makes life simple in one way.

But in other ways it doesn't. Because it isn't true!

It's just not true.

And it's not helpful to believe things that are not true.

Before we start living by the Bible and living with the Bible (as we should as Christians), we need to be clear of what we are dealing with.

The Word of God is Jesus.

And we read the Bible through Jesus - asking for the Spirit of Jesus to teach us what we should know and what we can learn and what God is saying to us today through this collection of books.

The tragedy of this verse is that it has been clumsily translated.

Instead of reading

***All Scripture is inspired by God** and is useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults and giving instructions for right living.*

It really should read

***Every Scripture inspired by God** is useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults and giving instructions for right living.*

And that makes a big difference.

All Scripture is inspired by God v Every Scripture inspired by God.

The first line that most Bibles have chosen suggests that every single bit of scripture is already inspired by God, the second and most accurate translation of the words show that this is not the case.

The Church of Scotland wrote a report a few years back on the subject of the Bible's Inspiration.

What does it mean when we say the Bible is the inspired Word of God?

What do we mean by these words exactly?

Our Church came up with a great phrase that I think sums up the truth of the situation.

The Bible is **not** the Word of God.

The Bible **contains** the Word of God.

Yes, God speaks through the Bible.
 Yes, God communicates with us and guides us through the scriptures.
 Yes, God's Word is found within the Bible - and that's why we read it again and again for the sake of our spiritual health.

But God isn't behind *every single word* in the Bible.
 There are some things that are wrong,
 some pictures of God that are not worthy of God,
 and some that need improving on.
 As I often say, one of the striking things that Jesus did was to take a piece of scripture and correct it or update it and sometimes that brought out a very different meaning.

Our job as Christians (in each and every age) is to read the scriptures asking for God help to recognise the timeless truth, and to disregard the other ideas that ancient people had about God being angry and vengeful and warlike and tribal, ideas that Jesus came to preach against.

Last week I announced that a prominent Christian author and leader Brian McLaren was over in the UK speaking in Largs (of all places).
 I went down there to hear him, and it was nice to see that some folk from this congregation had taken the time to do the same.

One of things he said was,
"Young people in particular don't want to believe in a god that is less loving and compassionate than they are. They don't want to believe in a god and they are not attracted to a god who appears to be morally repugnant, or liable to swing between being loving and being wrathful."

And they shouldn't have to.
 Because Jesus (who shows us most clearly what God is like) did not present a fickle or a wrathful God.

Jesus told us that God is love, and he disowned the passages in the scriptures that said otherwise.
 Anything that is not in the spirit of Jesus is not true of God.

And we need to make that clear from the very beginning – even to children.

During a recent trip to New Zealand, Brian McLaren was spoken to afterwards by a mum who wanted to share a story about her daughter.

Their family had moved to a new town. Before they got settled in a new church they started holding wee services in their house as a family.
 And at these mini services the different family members took turns and shared the parts of the service among themselves.
 One week, the youngest in the family – a girl called Lucy, decided she wanted to do the sermon this time, so they agreed to let her.

She is now 10, so was probably 8 or 9 years old when she wrote it.
At the time she chose her own topic and of all of the Bible **this** is what she chose to talk about.

So what I want to do is this.

I'm going to read her whole sermon. (It lasts about 30 seconds...)

Lucy's Sermon.

*"When I think about God I think of a person
who would never murder or kill anyone.
But when you think about it you wonder because wasn't it God
who swept the angel of death over Egypt?
It makes you think doesn't it?
Is God against it or is he not?
I mean, what had the **boys** done to die? It was the **Pharaoh** wasn't it?"*

*Now do you realise how little we know about God?
I hope this made you think, thanks for listening."*

Well that was her sermon!

Thank God that a nine-year-old is troubled by the violent view of God so many accept without a second thought.

Thank God her view of God is of someone *"who would never murder or kill anyone."*

As Lucy says,
*"I hope this made you think,
thanks for listening."*

2 Timothy 3:14–4:5

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