

OPENING UP THE WORD OF GOD

MARTIN CAMROUX

The other day someone showed me the Bible they'd been given as a confirmation present. It was small, beautifully bound. Inside every page had two columns of densely packed type. It was lovely to look at, nice to hold, and without a magnifying glass almost impossible to read! I suppose the point is that there are Bibles which are meant to be read and others which are meant to be looked at! Well, it is the former kind I am concerned with today. What I want to do is to try and offer help to those who want to open their Bibles and study them.

First, we need to recognise, whatever the size of the print, the Bible is not always an easy book to understand. Sometimes you hear inspiring stories of people who come across the Bible for the first time, pick it up, and are utterly changed by it. I'm sure that does happen. But such cases are the exception rather than the rule. I was 13 when I first seriously tried to read the Bible. Full of youthful enthusiasm I decided to read it all through. I started on Genesis. I struggled through Exodus. I gave up on Leviticus. I suspect many of us have suffered a similar fate.

The simple fact is this. The Bible is a library of 66 books, of a variety of kinds, the oldest of which goes back 3000 years. It is not always easy to understand. Everyone when they open will sometimes find themselves saying, whatever does that mean?

Fortunately there is help available and if we're wise we use it. Everyone here I expect owns a Bible. But how many people own a commentary on the Bible or use Bible reading notes? I was talking to someone recently and they said "I've been trying to read the Book of Revelation but I gave it up. I just couldn't understand it". "Oh" I said "which commentary did you use?" "No, I wasn't using a commentary". The Book of Revelation and they weren't using a commentary. Revelation is a book written in code. Unless that code is explained how can anyone expect to understand it?

Let me illustrate the point. Let me give you a little quiz on Revelation. And let me offer an invitation to dinner at the manse to the first person who gives me the right answers before I leave the church this morning.

Question 1. Rev. 14:8 "Fallen is Babylon the mighty" – which city is this a reference to (just to give you a clue it's not Babylon)

Question 2. In chapter 12 John refers to "A woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of 12 stars". Who is this?

Question 3. In the same chapter who is the red dragon? And it's nothing to do with the Welsh Rugby team.

Of course Revelation is the extreme example. There are parts of the Bible which you can read and they speak to you immediately but often what it says can't be fully understood unless you are willing to give some time and effort to Bible study. If you want to understand the letters of Paul you need to know who they were written to and why. If you want to understand the

parables of Jesus you need to know about the daily life of Palestine. The Bible is like much else. If you want what it has to offer you must be willing to work at it. Deborah Wroe is once again taking orders this year for Bible reading notes. Even if you never have before why not speak to her this year?

Secondly a guiding principle whenever you do Bible study it's writers do not always agree. Over the period of 1000 years the beliefs you find in it develop and change. Let me take one example. What can we expect after death? At first in the Old Testament the answer is nothing very much. At first when the place of the dead is described the dreariest words are used. It is the land of the "dark" and of "forgetfulness", of "silence" and of "destruction". Listen to the Book of Ecclesiastes:

"Everything is vanity since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and unclean ... They go down to the dead. ... The living have hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. The living know they will die but the dead know nothing; they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost. For them love, hate, ambition, all are now over" (Ecc 9:1-6).

When did you last here that read out a funeral service? It is where Israel started. But as they began to discover more about God's love – a new hope began. When we turn to Jesus, how differently he sees the matter. "In my Father's house are many mansions, if it were not so, I would have told you". Even on Calvary he turns to the thief; "Today you will be with me in paradise". The message of the New Testament is clear: "The Lord says do not be afraid, I am the first and the last, and I am the living one, for I was dead and now I am alive for ever more, and I hold the keys of death and death's domain".

When you read the Bible always make sure you see not simply where it begins – but where it ends. At first they no real idea of life after death, but the end they know that nothing can separate us from the love of God. At first they see God as a God of war who demands the death of his enemies. At the end Jesus says: "you have heard it was said love your neighbour and hate your enemies. But I say to you, love your enemies". At first they think God's love is for his chosen people alone, at the end they know it is for the whole world. The Bible rises up to the high point of Christ. Be sure you make his love is your guiding principle to the whole of it.

And then thirdly, and most importantly of all, the Bible can only fulfil its purpose when its message becomes personal and speaks into our lives. An African woman was chivvied by her neighbour about the amount of time she spent reading her Bible. "Look at all the other books there are in the world. Why do you keep coming back to that one?" At last the woman was stung to reply. "Other books I read" she said, "this book reads me".

The Bible can do that. It can speak into our personal lives. This may not always be easy for us. The other day I was in a room where there was there was a mirror up high and at an unusual angle. Instead of showing the front of my face it showed me the top of my head! Mirrors sometimes show you what you would rather not see. So it is with the Bible. It shows us ourselves. It shows our virtues and possibilities for good but also with our pride, cruelty and greed - all those parts of us we like to pretend are not there. When Oliver Cromwell was Lord Protector of England they wanted to paint a portrait of him. And Cromwell knew how portraits court painters flattered. "Show me" he said "pimples, warts and all else I shan't give

you a farthing for it". The Bible can look into our lives and show us as we really are which is why God can use to challenge and change us.

The Bible has powerful things to say not merely about our personal but our political and social lives. Jim Wallis was brought up in the kind of Church where they told him that Christians were concerned with another world not with this one. Feeling deeply the needs of the world he left the church and gave himself to radical politics. But something was lacking. So he turned back to the Bible. He read first the Sermon on the Mount, then on through the Gospels until he came to the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25. There he read the words of Jesus "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink". And then the command "in as much as you did unto the least of these my bothers, you did it to me". Jim Wallis calls that his conversion passage. He became not only a Christian, but a Christian who knew that to love God is to love the poor. Today he's one of the most powerful evangelical prophets of social justice in the United States.

Above all The Bible can bring us into touch with God. I hope many of us say how this had happened in our lives but let me tell you about mine.

For me the most important moment in my own religious life came when I was going through one of the sticky patches of life. My life seemed to have fallen apart. For a time I couldn't feel the presence of God or pray or make any sense of anything. And then one day I was sitting listening to a setting of the 23rd Psalm.

The Lord's my shepherd, I shall not want
In pastures green he leadeth me the quiet waters by.

Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for thou art with me,
Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

How often I'd heard those words before! How well I knew them. And yet at that moment it was like hearing them for the first time. Suddenly I knew what they meant in a way I'd never known before. Now they were spoken to me. "Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me". Even in the darkness God's love was there. Hold on. Hold on.

The Bible as a historical document is fascinating. The Bible as literature is deeply rewarding. But it is when its words touch our deepest life that it becomes the word of God to us. The author of 2 Timothy says this of Scripture: 'It has the power to make you wise and to lead you to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ'. That is the point the Bible was meant to bring us to. May God, in his mercy, bring his word to life in us today.

*Rev'd. Martin Camroux MA
Trinity Church, Sutton
(United Reformed/Methodist)
Cheam Road, Sutton, SM1 1DZ*