
What does the Bible really say?

(A sermon, with period for questions & discussion, at Carrs Lane URC church, Birmingham, July 2005)

What does the Bible really say? The obvious answer is, read it and see what it says. But when we ask, What does it say *about* this or that, it becomes less obvious. What does it say about God, about God's nature? In our first reading (Joshua 10: 7-14) God is a violent tribal deity who fights in battle for one tribe, mercilessly killing their enemies, even causing the sun to stand still for twenty four hours so that they could complete the slaughter. But that isn't the kind of God we believe in, is it? And quite apart from that, in the ancient world, when they believed that the sun moves round the earth, the idea of God's making the sun stand still for a while was conceivable. But now we know that it is the earth that travels round the sun, and that day and night on earth are caused by the earth rotating on its axis at about 1,000 miles an hour. If you were standing on a surface rotating at that speed, even though glued to it by gravity, and it suddenly stopped, you would be catapulted into space at quite a velocity! In other words the story is incredible. Again, the New Testament reading (Revelation 20: 11-18) tells us that God is a God who has sinners thrown into a lake of fire. Is that the kind of God we believe in? The fact is that in practice we all use the Bible selectively.

We can do our selecting on the basis just of our own preferences and what we have been taught. But it seems better to make use of the modern historical study of the Bible. Restricting ourselves to the New Testament, let us start with some basics.

Some of you, I know, are fully aware of all this, but others not. The first thing to be said is that the scholars differ among themselves about most things. When we take account of their work we have left the firm ground of unquestioned certainties, which we all instinctively prefer, and we've entered the inevitable

uncertainties of historical research, probability, judgment. There is however a central area of very wide consensus among reputable scholars, although even here there is always someone somewhere who differs at some point. But there is nevertheless a broad central consensus that is common to at least the enormous majority of university New Testament scholars.

What is this consensus? As we hear the Gospels read in church, one passage at a time on its own, it is natural to assume that this is an eye witness account, like a newspaper report of what the writer observed yesterday. But according to the consensus, none of them was in fact written by an eye witness. The earliest Gospel, Mark, is believed to have been written shortly after 70 AD, then Matthew and Luke in the 80's, using Mark as their primary source, along with other separate sources of their own, and possibly another presumed unknown common source called Q (which however some major scholars dispute). And finally John's Gospel comes towards the end of the century, in the 90's or possibly even later. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the synoptic Gospels because they have so much in common, in contrast to John, which has a very different character. In the synoptics, Jesus speaks in his unforgettable parables and vivid sayings and commands, whilst in John he often speaks in long theological discourses, and the theology embodied in them is much more developed in the direction of what became Christian orthodoxy than in the synoptics.

The Jesus of John's Gospel has, so to speak, a halo round his head and walks the earth as a consciously divine being. But it is part of the scholarly consensus that the great 'I am' sayings – 'I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me' (14, 6), 'I and the Father are one' (10:30), 'I am the light of the world' (8, 12), 'He who has seen me has seen the Father' (14, 9), cannot be attributed to the historical Jesus but are words put into his mouth by a Christian writer 70 or more years later expressing the developing theology of the church. And it is also part of the scholarly consensus that Jesus

himself did not teach that he was God incarnate, or God the Son, second person of a Divine Trinity, incarnate. This is not just the opinion of 'liberal' scholars but equally of conservative ones. Just two brief quotes. The late Archbishop Michael Ramsey, who was a New Testament professor before becoming a bishop, wrote 'Jesus did not claim deity for himself' (Jesus & the Living Past, 1980, p. 30) and Prof. James Dunn of Durham, possibly the leading New Testament scholar today in Britain, writes 'there was no real evidence in the earliest Jesus tradition of what could fairly be called a consciousness of divinity' (Christology in the Making, 1980, p. 60).

Another feature of the Fourth Gospel is that when it was written what was originally the Jesus movement within Judaism had separated itself from mainstream Judaism a generation earlier and was very much at odds with it. And so in John's Gospel the Jews are seen as the enemy and are presented in a very hostile but, as we now know, historically false light – this being the origin of the often violent Christian anti-Semitism which has stained the history of the church through the centuries, down to the twentieth. In actual fact the Jews of Jesus' time, of whom he was one, had a much higher religion than John's gospel suggests. One famous rabbi summarized the Law as 'Do not do others what you would not want them to do to you'. And they stressed the love of God as much as Jesus did.

And so it seems that we have to make the momentous distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. It is momentous because it is so difficult to merge them convincingly into one. And yet it is the Christ of faith who is central to so much of the language and ritual of the churches. He is Lord of all, he is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. By his blood we are cleansed. He is the saviour of the world. Crown him lord of all.

But surely, Wasn't Jesus not the Son of God, and therefore divine? Here again modern scholarship comes to our aid. We know now that 'son of God' had long been a familiar metaphor within Judaism. Israel as a whole was God's son,

Adam was God's son (Lk. 3, 28), the angels were sons of God (Lk. 20, 36), the ancient Hebrew kings were enthroned as son of God, hence the enthronement formula, 'You are my son, today I have begotten you' (Psalm 2,7). This, said to a grown man, was obviously meant metaphorically. And indeed within Judaism any outstandingly good and pious person could be called a son of God. A son of God was someone who was close to God, sometimes with a special mission from God. And the uniqueness that the church has read into it by restricting it to Jesus as the one and only Son of God, came as the gospel went out beyond Judaism into the Roman world, under St Paul's leadership, when 'son of God' became literalised, so that gradually in the course of the first centuries the metaphorical son of God was transformed into the metaphysical God the Son, Second Person of a divine Trinity.

So – this at least is the serious possibility that we have to consider - the cosmic Christ figure is a creation of the human religious imagination. And yet, as we all know, this is the Christ of so many of our hymns and prayers and sermons. And if as a church we one day come to accept that we need to do some fundamental rethinking, it will not be easy – and the longer we postpone it the harder it becomes. It may however rescue the churches from our present ghetto status in western society, in which we are associated in the minds of most people's out there with all sorts of unbelievable ideas and images, not to be taken seriously.

So my suggestion is that we have to re-focus on the historical Jesus, even though the scholars tell us that we don't know nearly as much about him as we would like to.

But we do know enough to see the Jesus whom we can be presenting to the world. He taught in unforgettable parables the love and forgiveness of God, and he gave teaching about how to live – much of it brought together in the Sermon on the Mount – which remains as inspiring and as challenging today as

2,000 years ago. There is endless scope in Jesus' teaching for great preaching today which can transform peoples' lives.

People sometimes ridicule the idea that Jesus' message amounted just to the love of God and the brotherhood and sisterhood of humanity. But this seems to be precisely what he did teach. 'Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law? And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it. You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets"' (Matt. 22, 36-40). This was not of course new to the Jews. Jesus is quoting here from Deuteronomy 6,4 and Leviticus 19,18.

The gospel is that we all live all the time in the presence of God, who loves us and seeks our answering love, and this is to be expressed in love of one another. It's very simple, and when - if ever in this world - if we all do it the kingdom of heaven will have come. And in so far as we do a little bit to love our neighbours, whom we know now to include the poor, the starving, the diseased, the oppressed and exploited round the world, we are bringing the Kingdom a little bit nearer.

Finally, the words of the Lord's prayer, which we shall be saying together presently, are some of the most likely to come from the lips of Jesus himself, and in this great prayer we address God directly as our Father, not through any mediator, and we directly ask God's forgiveness, expecting to receive it if we will only forgive one another, without there being any thought of an atoning sacrifice being needed. What became the great theological doctrines of Incarnation, Atonement and Trinity are just not there. But so far from the gospel without them being too little, it is still more than any of us can handle. Jesus' teaching, incarnated in his life, in which he identified with the poor and marginalized, stands before us as a perpetual challenge, and part of the challenge is that we have to work out for ourselves what love of neighbour means in our own chaotic

and bewildering age, and practice it – but, I am suggesting, without concealing it any longer from the world behind a sacred screen of outdated and untenable dogmas.