

Isaiah 55.6 -13; John 5.31-40
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Dr. Brian Haymes

My home church used to begin its services of worship with a procession, as we do here, but with one difference. I wonder what significance, if any, you might think it has. After the choir had entered and taken their places, a deacon came, carrying the Bible. The deacon would place the Bible on the lectern, open it and read from its pages the call to worship, so that, as our minister used to say, God at least had the first word.

Visibly, at the centre of worship in most British Baptist Churches, stands the Bible, front and centre as you Americans say. Back home, we read passages from it in the services. Its language obviously shapes the prayers and hymns and anthems. The sermon is usually related to what we heard in the Bible readings. The whole service in this sense is permeated with Scripture. It is the air we breathe. Most English Baptist Churches are like that.

All of which might strike some people as odd, even unwise. This might be particularly the case with any visitors not used to attending church. Where else but among religious people do you find such an ancient text being given such privilege? Such visitors might know, as we know, that the book has a very human history, what with all the editing that went on and the arguments about what books would be in and what left out of the Canon.

It is obviously an old book, operating with ideas and concepts we no longer live by. It seems to picture a flat earth, covered by a wonderful firmament in which, from time to time, windows are opened and down comes the rain if God wills. We simply don't think with that old fashioned cosmology any more, delightful though the picture may be. Rather more prosaically we watch the television weather forecasts and learn about warm and cold fronts.

And it's not just that the book is old that is a problem, it also has some embarrassing teachings. I recall a service where one of the readings was Psalm 137, "by the waters of Babylon there we sat down, there we wept", and so on. Only, on this occasion, unusually, the whole psalm was read so that we heard the ending, "O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against a rock". Then the reader intoned, "this is the word of the Lord". "No", roared a voice in the congregation. At least one person could not imagine God saying that! No more can I.

Indeed, not everything in the Bible is Christian. For the larger part of Christian history most people held that the Bible taught that slavery was a divinely appointed order of human life. You could make a very good case even now, quoting the Bible, in support of a system of slavery. But we think that is wrong. It is not Christian, we say, whatever some texts in the Bible affirm.

And so we acknowledge that, like any written text, the Bible requires interpretation. In experience, we know that the Bible can be used to support almost anything, even wicked ends, as was the case with apartheid in South

Africa. In the wrong hands this is clearly a dangerous book. Yet there it is, open, at the centre of worship.

Some suggest we get rid of it, or at least marginalize it. This is not a new response and, historically, always weakens the church and risks the loss of Christian identity. So, more creatively, we might ask what would it mean to treat this old text with integrity? We ask this with some urgency because we are people whose very presence here indicates that we long to grow in God, it is one of the reasons why we have come. We want to be encountered by God. What role might the Bible play in that?

The Bible tells, so the church affirms, the great story of God. In that sense alone, it is impossible to imagine the living church without this book, even though we know it can be used to oppress and support our divisions. It often starts to go wrong when we fall into that old trap of making too much of a good thing.

That can happen when the Bible, as it were, loses, in our eyes, its obvious humanity and becomes almost an item of worship itself. We are not touching on some light matter here. We know, all too painfully today, the phenomenon called fundamentalism, something found in other religions as well as Christianity. In the text, so fundamentalists claim, there is a direct literal expression of the truth of God and, sometimes, in the name of that truth, devotees are prepared to do almost anything, even to do what others think is evil, to kill and die in martyr deaths. Literally, as St. Paul said in another context, the letter kills.

We can go simply too far in identifying the Bible, word for word, with the Word of God, Modern fundamentalism is not the first time this step has been taken. In fact, we found something like that going on in our Gospel reading.

One of the controversies in the early church involved how the ancient scriptures were to be read. Some Scribes and other Bible scholars of the day offered their interpretations. They were devoted to the received text, believing that within it were the words of eternal life.

Can that ever be the case with print on paper, identifying the words so obviously written by humans with the word of God? Yes, say some, arguing that God directly inspired the writers. Indeed, they might well have been inspired, but to imagine that they were just “taken over” as it were and used as impersonal typewriters, to hammer out the message, is to imagine a very different kind of God to the one the Scripture themselves proclaim. More importantly for this sermon, it is to teach something very different to what the Bible itself often says about God’s speech and communication with us.

You and I spin many words and the truth is that sometimes, most times, they have little effect; words, words, words. But often, in the Bible, the notion of God’s word is inseparable from the fact of God’s acts and deeds. Unlike us, when God speaks something happens. The hint was there in our reading from Isaiah, “My word shall not return to me empty, it shall accomplish its purpose”. Remember, “in the beginning God said, let there be light.... and there was... light”. When God speaks something happens.

Here is a very active concept of word and speech, word and act going together. Actually, we recognize the truth of this, for even today some words, some speakers, have power and word and act and deed relate. “I have a dream”,

says a black prophet and we are all caught up into it and hear more than the human words of Martin Luther King. Isn't there a sense that real preaching has about it that creative energy which belongs to the word of God? Has not this sometimes happened to you here in worship, as you heard more than the preacher's voice, more than just a bright idea being discussed? Something happened, you were addressed by God.

So, much of the Bible has it. But then into the story of God there came something new. John's gospel begins, you remember, with the theme of the Word, the Word that was in the beginning by whom all things were made, the creative Word of God, the Word that was God. And then the startling claim. "The Word became flesh and lived among us"!

God's word takes human form. It is not print on paper but the living person Jesus Christ. Jesus, word of God incarnate, the word alive and active, the word in its most complete expression, a word with its own freedom, a word near us but beyond us, never to be reduced to a book, nor, in the popular neo-gnosticism of our day, to our inner feelings. This is not a word of our making.

There were those in Jesus' time, and perhaps now, who searched the scriptures believing that in them there was eternal life, but those biblically bound readers refused to come to Jesus for that life, even though the ancient scriptures pointed to him, the bearer of the life that only the word of God brings.

Of course, there is no serious understanding of Jesus without what we call the Old Testament, without his context of history and scripture. But Jesus is himself the key, the criterion for grasping scripture's meaning. He is why, in spite of what some say the scriptures teach, on slavery, apartheid, patriarchy and other forms of oppression, we say these are all wrong. They are wrong because they contradict what God has said and did in Jesus.

But there is more, because this Jesus is not himself confined to the text. He is the risen one and comes to challenge his church and the people of the world as the living word of God. And even more, God, as the ancient text promised, has let loose his Spirit, one of whose major tasks it is to take of the things of Christ and show them to us, leading us deeper into the truth of the God of the living Word, encountering us with that word.

This is why even today, reading the Bible, even listening to a sermon, we can find ourselves surprised, addressed by God, a word which challenges, rebukes, restores and brings us life. As Jesus said in the Upper Room, "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth ... He will take what is mine and declare it to you". Indeed the letter kills but the Spirit makes alive. This is the dynamic of the word we long to hear.

So we thank God for the Bible and, if we are wise Christians, we read and listen carefully to what it says. We are aware of its serious limitations, its violence and patriarchy, for example, But, reading wisely, we are ready to let this ancient story of God and his people shape our life, to set as it were the trajectory of our living. In that sense, we thank God for the word written. Where would we be without it?

But we especially thank God for the Word incarnate, this unimaginable and beautiful love which seeks us, challenges and disturbs so much of our life, holds us and will not let us go. Jesus, the word, the living Lord present with us and ever active in the world, the one to whom the Scriptures bear witness.

And we thank God for the constant action of the Spirit, taking the things of Christ and showing them to us, helping us hear the word that makes for life, challenging us often to think again, even as the Pilgrim Fathers and Mothers used to say that the Lord has more light and truth to break forth from out of his holy word.

So praise be to God this day, who spoke the word and all creation began to be. Praise be to God, who spoke the word in the coming of Jesus, word of God incarnate, the heart of God open to the world. Praise be to God, who spoke and raised Jesus from the dead so that he lives among us now, and death shall no more have dominion. Praise be to God, who poured out the Spirit, the life giving spirit, ever pointing to Jesus, ever touching our minds and hearts with the transforming truth of Christ.

Praise be to the creative word, the word made flesh, the word never far from us, the word which seeks to accomplish its purposes of life and justice among those who have ears to hear and hearts to love, a word we did not create but is spoken to us in grace. Pilgrim people are listening people, listening for the Christlike God. Thank God this day for the written, incarnate, living Word, Jesus the Christ, calling us to enter into his story now, letting it shape our lives and hopes, our ambitions and our actions, and so to share the life of God.