

## Bible Sunday Sermon by Geoff Oates, 27 October 2019

Kath and I got married straight after leaving university, and though we didn't have debts (you still got student grants in those wonderful days) we'd barely got a penny between us. Neither did our college friends who made up most of our wedding guests. So we were very careful to make sure our present list covered the essentials - cheaply.

As my college household consisted of an old sleeping bag and some cutlery borrowed from my mum's picnic set, the two big priorities were some bedding and a dinner service.

One or two well-meaning relatives did furnish us with some lovely delicate and expensive items of glass and porcelain. We wrapped these up carefully and put them away safely in my mum's attic – no doubt hoping that one day we'd have a nice glass-fronted sideboard to display them in.

And guess what! 34 years later – they're still in the attic, still wrapped up. While the faithful 1985 Marks & Spencer Harvest dinner service is still gracing our kitchen table, breakfast lunch and dinner, as it has done every day since we got married.

The Bible is still, even in secular Britain, a big-selling book. Most families have one. But I cannot help feeling that in most households, the bible is rather more like the expensive glass and porcelain that sits unused in a locked sideboard – or in the loft – than it is the hard-wearing crockery we use day-by-day.

What about your bible? Is it showing the right amount of wear and tear for its age? Is it well-thumbed, the spine nice and soft, the cover worn at the edges? A few fly-notes or underlinings here and there? I hope so. It's nothing to be ashamed of. Because the Bible is not meant to sit in a display case like a treasured souvenir of an old friendship. It's meant to be read. It belongs on the kitchen table. And not just on Sundays.

Romans 15 v 4: "For whatever was written in former days was written for **our instruction**, so that by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope."

'For our instruction'? When Paul recommends study of the scriptures to the readers of Romans, he means the works we know as the Old Testament. Their ancient authors wrote them for the instruction of their own generation, not for us. I'm sure it never crossed Paul's mind for a moment that 2,000 years later his own essays, sermons and pastoral tips to the young Christian communities around the Mediterranean would be acclaimed all over the world with the words, 'This is the Word of the Lord'!

When Jesus got up at Nazareth to preach his very first sermon, like all good preachers he goes straight to the old scriptures for his text. 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor'. Back 500 years to the words of Isaiah. But what does he say of them? 'Today this has been fulfilled in your hearing!' But Isaiah was not thinking about what would happen 500 years later. He was proclaiming God's Gospel of love and justice to his own age. 'Prophecy' is not about telling the future, it's about speaking the truth about God. And his truth is the same for every generation.

"Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction". Handle that with care, too. The Bible is not an instruction manual. There isn't an index that tells you which page to turn to solve every problem or answer every question. Instead, there are stories about people, people on the same journey as you and me. People asking the same questions at the same crossroads and junctions. In our modern, online age the old instruction manual has given way to the 'Frequently asked questions' page. That fits the Bible much better.

Frequently asked questions. These are often interactive pages where many contributors add to the picture. That fits the Bible, too.

It's a wonderful kaleidoscope of myths, legends, tribal history, theology, moral and civil laws, praise and liturgy, prophecy, parables and teaching. **Stories** about Kings and warriors, shepherds and fisherman and peasant girls. Written by dozens of authors over hundreds of years, and addressed to readers whose view of the world was constantly developing. But all helping to tell the whole story of their search for God.

Some answers are more helpful to us than others. And yes, sometimes they will contradict each other. Some Christians get very indignant about this, and create increasingly clunky theological arguments to try to reconcile everything into a neat, tidy package.

Or they turn it into a kind of crossword puzzle where everything fits together nicely if only we understand the Bible as a vast collection of cryptic clues.

We don't need to worry. The Bible is rich with differing viewpoints. Rejoice in that. It is a sign of its honesty. A sign that our God is honest! Mankind's journey to discover its God has never gone in a straight line! You'll find diversions, cul-de-sacs, missed turnings, contraflows. The human race has always had a wonderful knack for going round and round in circles. The Bible doesn't try to hide that. And the great news is that God can cope with it, even if we find it hard.

Frequently asked questions: Is he a tribal God, the God of my race or region, or the creator of all? Is he a god of justice, whose faithfulness to his obedient followers demands punishment for those who disobey, or is he a God whose Grace has no limits? Is he a God of ritual and ceremony, or a God of intimacy and spontaneity?

Is he a God of Kings and patriarchs, or is he the God of the poor and humble? Is he a distant and unknowable God, or is he our friend and companion? Does he really care all that much about our sex lives? Is he only a 'he'? Is he more concerned about our life before death, or our life after death? Just who or what is this Jesus? Man or God or both? And is he really coming back?

On any honest journey of faith you will wrestle with some or all of those questions, and many more. You will maybe have found answers to some of them, at least for now. But don't stop your journey. Keep reading, and keep asking those questions. Share the journeys that faithful men and women from Abraham to St Paul have made before us, and see what answers they have come up with.