

Sermon on Wednesday 26 June 2024

by Rev. Bill Church

The Old Testament

The second run of the Bible Course is going well, and, because it begins at the beginning, it is now going through the Old Testament.

This has reminded us that the OT contains a lot of violence, some of it gratuitous and some of it looking much like ethnic cleansing, and some of it appearing to be encouraged by God.

The stars of the show seem to have dysfunctional families and some of the heroes (think about Jacob) get away with less than honest dealings.

On occasion, the OT presents a very punitive picture of God.

And if you have been wading through Leviticus, or the specifications of the Temple in 1 Kings, or the details of the tabernacle in Exodus, you may be prompted to ask: "Why bother?"

Marcion in the second century concluded just that. He argued that the God of the OT was a different God from the God of the New Testament and of Christianity.

He was wrong – it is the same God, but seen by different people, and he was declared a heretic. And rightly so. There are good reasons to read, study and understand the OT.

Of these, some are general to everybody: The OT is among the oldest surviving literature anywhere.

For a major world religion, it is THE book. It contains some really good stories, as any Sunday School can testify.

Adam and Eve; Noah's ark and the rainbow; David and Goliath; Samson (so much so that your tin of Tate and Lyle treacle still displays the dead lion trademark "Out of the strong came forth sweetness"); Jonah and the whale (actually a fish but don't worry) etc. etc.

The OT contains quite a strong line on environmental issues, which the NT notably lacks. The OT is interested in how we should treat the land and our animals, and celebrates nature (read Psalm 104).

The OT is remarkably uncensored. David and Solomon were the greatest of kings at the peak of Israel's national history, yet they are allowed to have feet of clay – David's adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, and Solomon's harem of pagan wives.

Nor is the OT monolithic. The books of Ruth and Jonah are deliberately subversive of the exclusionary policies of the returned exiles.

Amos and Psalms 50 and 51 pour scorn the ceremonies and animal sacrifices which were central to the Temple and establishment religion.

In Psalm 50 God asks the rhetorical question: "Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?"

Other reasons to read the OT are specific to Christians. The OT is essential to understand the NT.

Matthew's Gospel in particular is absolutely full of OT quotations, not always precisely accurate.

And all the gospels are framed in the light of the OT, for instance: Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, the flight into Egypt, John the Baptist as Elijah.

When Philip the deacon met the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8), he proclaims Jesus in the light of Isaiah which the eunuch was reading.

Jesus saw himself in the mirror of the OT.

In his sermon at Nazareth (Luke 4), Jesus reads from Isaiah and declares that the prophecy is fulfilled in him.

On the road to Emmaus the risen Jesus: "interpreted to (the two disciples) the things about himself in all the scriptures."

The argument about whether Jesus was the Messiah, and, if so, what sort of Messiah, is framed on OT scripture.

The crucifixion as a sacrifice is posited on OT understandings. For Jesus and the evangelists and Paul "the scriptures" were the OT.

They honoured and used them; so should we.