

Writing the next chapter

Dicken's novel 'the mystery of Edwin Drew', Gaudi's cathedral Sagrada Familia, Mozart's Requiem, the Holy Bible; what have these all got in common?

Just a few of the world's great unfinished masterpieces.

This morning, I want to talk about the unfinished business of scripture; the unwritten chapters. This Bible story which has changed countless lives and transformed history... isn't over. It didn't end when the last of these books were written or indeed when the final cut was made and they were bound together into this canon; this library we call the Holy Bible. The story continues... in and through us...

Every day, regardless of whether we realise it or not; every day we write new chapters of this story of love-come-down. This, the greatest story ever told is unfolding this very second, in and through us. And that's mind-blowing, isn't it? The responsibility to faithfully tell and live out this story is both the single greatest privilege and the single greatest risk; risk because God chooses to use the likes of you and me to enable his story to be told; his kingdom to come, his plans to be fulfilled. Knowing this changes everything. Our lives take on this incredible purpose and perspective; because every second of our existence has eternal significance. Everything we do and don't do, everything we say and how we say it, everything counts. God is counting... on you and on me.

In order to both live and tell the story faithfully, in order not to deviate from the storyline of the divine Author, it's essential that we *know* the preceding chapters. We wouldn't dream of jumping straight into part three of a trilogy... so much would be lost to us. In the same way, our back story, found within these books of the Bible, is essential reading, not only because it tells us the story so far, but also because it speaks into the story we now find ourselves in. Contained within these pages is not only divine wisdom, but here we discover 'words of eternal life and significance'; a message that can bring us to life, that can set us free and empower us to become more of who we were always created to be.

So, when we speak of scripture having authority in our lives, that's what we mean; its authority is the weight and the wisdom and the life of the story so far. Without that authority the plot would be would be lost.

In the beginning, in those first opening chapters of the Bible, the scene is set. From the imagination of God, the beauty of order is born from chaos, and from the dust of the earth and the breath of God, humanity takes centre stage. Created in the divine image, and created good, we are set free to explore those most significant of questions, like 'who am I?' and 'why am I here?'

And as the chapters unfold major and minor characters are introduced. Over time secrets are uncovered and characters evolve, there are twists and surprises, and sometimes red herrings and tangents. A thousand storylines run parallel with one great story threaded throughout it all; the dream of God to know and be known; to love and be loved; this secret that we will always feel lost until we discover the love of the One who made us and actually, who never left us.

Different genres, different categories of the library, are explored as generation after generation seek to uncover and make sense of this thing called life. Poets and prophets, and farmers and kings; each storyteller speaking with their own unique voice, from their own unique experience, within their own particular culture and unsurprisingly therefore, with their own bias. If we arrange these writings chronologically, we begin to see an evolution in their understanding of God. At first their picture is heavily influenced by the warlike and unpredictable gods of the surrounding nations, but slowly a truer picture evolves until finally the True Image, the Living Word himself, Jesus, takes flesh and walks among us, to finally reveal the truth, to display in flesh and blood, in language we understand, what our God is really like, and indeed what human beings could be like.

And so, everything before and everything since must always return to the central character revealed in Jesus. He is both the anchor and the author of the story. But thankfully he has not left us without inspiration; he has sent the Prompter, the Spirit. Into the un-chartered chapters of the future speaks the same voice that called Abraham and Moses, Isaiah and the Baptist; the same voice that spoke to and through Jesus, speaks now to us.

How?

Through circumstance and conscience, through the wisdom of others, chiefly through these complex inspiring and sometimes confusing scriptures; a story born out of a very human struggle to make sense of life. Inspired by God's Spirit, yes, but not as some contest, composed and dictated by God himself.

That view does a great injustice I believe to these writings and to ourselves and to God. There is a name for attributing to the Bible inerrancy or infallibility - it's called Bibliolatry.

We are all interpreters. To insist that we can arrive at an unpolluted, definitive reading of any part of the ancient library of books, composed by equally fallible human beings, is just not possible. We will always read through the lenses of our own worldview with our own filters and agendas. That's why two equally devout and faithful followers can arrive at two very different conclusions.

The two most essential things we must therefore pray for is humility and open-heartedness. In my opinion that's the true meaning of the word 'liberal'. God has gifted us with intellect; we must never leave our intelligence or critical faculties outside the door of the church or suspend our questions and doubting when we read these words. We are called to engage and struggle and above all, to listen.

We must also never ignore wisdom that comes from the scientific world or philosophy or cultural studies or indeed other religions. All of the above in their day inspired the authors of our scriptures. God has given us the same questioning minds and imaginations as those who wrote these books, but more importantly he has given us the same Spirit.

Our lives are the history of God in the making. He has, in those famous words 'no hands or feet but ours'. He is relying on us to communicate and embody his love and grace. And that can happen in the ordinary as much as the extraordinary, in both the fullness and the emptiness of life.

We can if we're not careful become so wrapped up in the desire for orthodoxy... believing the right thing, that we close ourselves off from the Word, capital W; the Spirit of Jesus, who often speaks through the 'wrong things' and through the unexpected. The Sufi poet Rumi once wrote 'out beyond our ideas of right and wrong there is a field. I'll meet you there'

The truth is that we are all heretics, and that's a relief!

The Bible is unfinished because the story isn't over yet. God is counting on us to live his story through relying on his Spirit. All we have to do is count on him, ask for that inspiration and that power and that grace. So, shall we take a moment now to pray for the inspiration and empowering of the Holy Spirit.

Come Spirit of God into the writer's block of our lives. Come into the dramas and the comedies and the tragedies of our lives, and speak words of inspiration and life. Write your story through our lives. Through us, bring laughter and healing, gift a voice to the voiceless, bring blessing and peace, that your kingdom might come and your story be told.

Come Holy Spirit.

Amen.