

'Making Space for the Word of God'

The Very Revd Dr Jeffrey John, Dean of St Albans, gave the opening talk at a recent Diocesan Event - 'In the beginning ... Making Space for God in our Lives' - it was too long to print it all but here is the essence of what he said - and it fits in with the series of sermons we had on the Bible during October:

I take that title to mean that today is about the place that the Bible has in our spiritual life. But I think the first thing we have to do is to be clear about what – or who – we mean by 'The Word of God' that we are making space for. Because when I talk about the Word of God, I don't mean the written text of the Bible; I mean what St John means by the word of God, the Logos, the living, spiritual Christ who became incarnate in Jesus. Because what the written text is saying may not always be what the Living Word is saying. Sometimes it can seem to be the opposite.

Let me start with a favourite story I often use when I start off courses about the Bible. I was in a church – somebody else's church - a few years ago, when Numbers 15.32-36 was appointed to be read as the lesson. Numbers 15.32-36 dates back to the time the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness, and it tells the story of a poor little Israelite man who went out into the desert one cold night to collect sticks to make a fire to keep warm. Only he'd forgotten it was the sabbath, and so he got arrested by the guards. "Therefore", the reader who was reading the lesson solemnly proclaimed, "the guards dragged the man before Moses and Aaron, who said, 'This man is a sabbath-breaker; he must put to death. Let him be stoned by all the community outside the camp'. So they took the man outside and they stoned him with stones as Moses and Aaron commanded, until he was dead.... *This is the word of the Lord*". And we all replied: "*Thanks be to God!*"

The most disturbing thing was that nobody turned a hair. Worse still, when the preacher referred to the passage in his sermon, he simply took it at face value. It didn't occur to him to ask the question *in what sense* this rather savage little tale is supposed to be the word of the Lord, or to question what on earth it is meant to tell us about God's nature.

It is very bizarre that we say 'This is the word of the Lord' after such a reading. And of course there are plenty more passages like it, or worse. There are so many texts where God himself is portrayed as unreasonable, violent and arbitrary. Think of all those passages in Genesis and Exodus where God commands genocide and ethnic cleansing in order to plant Israel in Palestine – passages of course which are still having an unhelpful impact on the situation in Israel Palestine today. Think of all the occasions when whole tribes are wiped out for the sins of a single individual, or when the sins of parents are visited on their children's children.

You might say, 'But this is only the only the Old Testament, the New Testament is different.' Well yes it is, largely, but no means always. Try reading Romans 9, where Paul borrows Jeremiah's depiction of God as a potter, and argues that God has the right, if he wishes, to create some people for salvation and some for damnation. Paul paints a terrible picture of a tyrannical, arbitrary God, who hardens people's hearts in order to destroy them, just like Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart; God the potter who makes pots just in order to smash them as and when he pleases, as if human free will, and justice and compassion counted for nothing. Now I don't actually think that was Paul's considered view; there are many other passages to suggest otherwise, but nevertheless it is there. In that particular passage of Romans the portrayal of God is monstrous. Is that 'The Word of the Lord'?

The trouble with saying 'This is the Word of the Lord' after one little bit of scripture, is that it gives the impression that we are supposed to take each and every bit of the Bible, taken out of context, as if it were a literal, direct message from God to us now. And that is clearly wrong. Scripture is very often a vehicle of God's word, but that's not the same as it being God's word in itself. In the truest sense, as St John says, there is only one Word of the Lord, and that's Jesus, the Living Word; and he often speaks to us *through* the written words of scripture, yes, but he also speaks also through prayer and church and sacrament and conscience and reason and experience and other people. And sometimes the Word that comes in those other ways will be against what scripture literally says.

It might be truer to say that the Whole Bible, taken together, is the Word of the Lord because then each bit is corrected by the perspective of the whole, but even then, one still needs prayer and reason and discussion and knowledge in order to work out what the perspective is, in order to hear what the living Word is.

So real Bible study that tells you the truth about these books really does matter. At the most basic level too many people still don't really grasp that the Bible isn't a single book, but 84 books, including the Apocrypha - books of history, poetry, wisdom, legends, letters, written and re-edited in different contexts and languages across the space of a thousand years. The Bible is like a kaleidoscope, a rather jumbled and messy kaleidoscope, consisting of many different authors' insights into God at many different times and in many different places. Some parts of the kaleidoscope are dazzlingly bright, and incredibly inspiring and moving and challenging, and seem to relate us directly with the beauty and glory and truth of God. But other parts are deeply coloured, and have to be carefully related to their context before you can see the light that is refracted through them. And some parts are extremely dark, so that it is hard to see what kind of light might ever have been behind them at all.

In particular, we need to see very clearly that across all these different books, and often within individual books the picture of God himself and the most basic ideas about right and wrong keep changing. From author to author and book to book, and even from verse to verse sometimes, you can move between polytheism and monotheism; between the anthropomorphic God who walked in the garden of Eden, or the warrior God of Judges, and the universal Spiritual Lord of Second Isaiah; you can move between polygamy and monogamy; between animal sacrifice and repudiation of animal sacrifice; between a tribal morality and an individual morality; between frank disbelief in an afterlife and belief in an afterlife.

So you can't just pick up the Bible and always expect to make sense of it, unless you are prepared to find out a bit about the background that individual books and texts are coming from. You have to ask questions about what a passage was trying to say in its own context before you can hope to relate that to what it is trying to say to you today, because very often those things will be very different.

The process of doing that is enormously enriching, not just in intellectual terms but in spiritual terms. I know people often feel that approaching the Bible in a questioning way is somehow irreverent, and they are often afraid that taking a more critical or academic approach to scripture will undermine their faith. Well, I can only say that I've found the opposite is true. For me being allowed to question and learn where the different parts of the Bible are coming from brought it to life and made it far more relevant to real experience.

Let me take one obvious area where I think you can see this working. The image of God we have in your mind is basic to our spiritual life, and it obviously affects deeply how we pray to him. That image is created very largely by the by the different pictures and stories about God that we get from the Bible, and the relative weight we give to them. When I say 'picture' of God, I don't necessarily mean an actual, visual image of God the Father or Jesus, because of course many people many don't think of God pictorially at all. But whether we actually picture anything or not, the fact is that when we pray we do have a concept in our minds which we are calling God, and it's worth thinking exactly what that concept is and how it affects our praying. What is the person you pray to actually like? How would you describe the God you pray to? And how does it relate to what you have read that God is like in scripture?

The picture of God we have inside us is crucial to the way we pray, and we mustn't let any particular picture of God, whether it is from the Bible or not, get in our way. Because the fact is, the Bible has many very different pictures of God, from the savage to the sublime, and we ought to take real, conscious care which picture or concept we are actually working with.

Talking to people over the years, I have found there's an enormous disjunction between the picture of God that different churches paint and the way most of us feel in our hearts that God must be. Many people are put off by some picture of God that they imagine they are supposed to accept but that argues with their own instinct and seriously gets in the way.

I don't mean that the idea we have of God in our own mind is ever perfect, any more than any particular biblical picture is perfect. What we think and feel about God is always just a construct. It's not that we move from the wrong picture of God to the right one, it's rather that we move to a different one which is hopefully truer, or at least an aspect of the truth which is right for us at the moment, for the stage we happen to be at. Our picture of God and therefore our relationship with him in prayer will keep changing as we grow, and so it should. We can never capture the whole of God with our own thoughts; we'll only ever see aspects of him. But gradually, hopefully, we are piecing the picture together.

Within scripture itself there is a long tradition of people challenging God, arguing with him, wrestling with him. Abraham pleads with God to save the Cities of the Plain. 'Come on God' he says, 'Let them off. It wouldn't be fair to punish the just along with the guilty. Won't you spare them for the sake of 100 just men?' Oh OK says God, if there are 100 good men I'll spare them. 'What about 50 then?' says Abraham; or what about 10?' And each time God relents.

In stories like that it often seems as if God himself *wants* people to stand up to him, to work out for themselves what is right; and when they do, then he seems to give way, and so the picture of God changes. The prophets frequently stand up to God and have rows with him.

In many cases the quarrel is about God's justice, but sometimes the quarrel is an even more fundamental one about God's existence, or at least his annoying habit of not seeming to be there half the time. 'Truly thou art a God that hidest thyself' says Isaiah'. In other words, Where the hell are you when we need you? You play cat and mouse with us...

Take the Psalms. So many of the psalms sound like a man in the depths of depression and despair, who, when he cries out, feels there is no-one there. 'Out of the deep I have called unto thee O Lord, Lord hear my voice. I call in the night-time but thou answerest not... Why art thou so heavy O my soul, and why art thou so disquieted within me... Up Lord, why sleepest thou, why hast thou cast thy people from thee?'

The biblical writers are struggling to see God and make sense of life's different experiences. But in the process, each of them is helping to put the whole picture together, refracting something of the light of the living Word - the light that enlightens every one, as John says - and so making part of the kaleidoscope.

According to the New Testament we are the ones who have to struggle with him now. And of course anyone who seriously tries to pray knows what a struggle it can be. We can experience exactly what Isaiah meant when he said 'Truly God thou art a God that hidest thyself'. We can all discover the emptiness of the Psalmist when he wonders if there is actually anyone there at all. These struggles are repeated in every generation of those who seek God's face.

The point is, there is something about the struggle to see God and make sense of God that is essential, because it does make us grow, and does enable us in the end, like Jacob, to see his face.

Through our own struggle to pray, to listen to what the living Word is saying to us in prayer and scripture and church and sacrament, gradually he is changing us from the inside. We grow to see for ourselves more clearly what God is like, and in the process, like in a mirror, his image in us is clarified too.

Paul says too in 1 Corinthians 13, 'Now we only see the image dimly, as in a mirror' - but after all our growing and struggling is over - 'then we shall see face to face'. In the end, we shall see God as he is, and we shall be our completed selves, the people he always meant us to be.