

Between the Lines: Reading the Bible for our Time

Revd Dr Peta Sherlock: a talk for ACU 31 August, 2005

I was amused by the adjectives used to describe myself and Tim Gaden when this evening was suggested: I am supposedly a "liberal evangelical anglican". Once you get to two adjectives I reckon you should stop. You could go on, woman, priest, archdeacon, mother, wife, grandmother, gardener, writer.... in the end, I am just me! But I suppose you need to have some idea of where the speaker is coming from. "Is she worth hearing? Especially for a one-off speech." (My parishioners now mostly know my one sermon that I preach over and over. I heard a parishioner once explaining this one sermon to another parishioner in difficult circumstances: "Peta says 'Shit happens but God still loves you'." I remember thinking, 'Yeah, that's about right!')

But you may be asking: What filters do I need to put on in order to get something decent out of what she says about the Bible? Here are a four of my pet hates as starting points to get your filters in place.

Pet hate 1. People who talk about Scripture without ever using it

James Barr, the excellent OT scholar, was as guilty of this as were the fundamentalists he raged against. He wrote so many books (good books too) railing against their ideas. They wrote back long articles and books about inerrancy and infallibility, 2 Timothy 3:16 and inspiration, even about hermeneutics when it came into fashion. But Barr's rage was so great that it seems to me he produced few books actually fulfilling his vocation, to interpret the OT.

Positively I am saying that in reading 2 Timothy 3:16, I concentrate on the "*All Scripture is useful*", half of the verse rather than the "*and inspired by God*". Negatively I am saying, on Bible Sunday, don't preach me a sermon about how good the Bible is. Rather, preach me a sermon using the Bible that *shows* me how good it is!

Pet hate 2. People who "break open God's word"

I never want to break God's word. I love it and I want to be as gentle with it as it has been with me. Feminists rightly warn us that the Bible ought to have a label "dangerous for women", but we could just as easily add "and slaves, and gays, and pacifists, and, and". I have actually never found Scripture dangerous to my health. Challenging, yes, but not dangerous in itself. I have heard it misinterpreted terribly to tell an abused woman that Jesus wanted her to go back and submit again to a husband who beat her. But that was so blatantly stupid, I immediately knew, even way back in my naive years, that there was no way *that* could be a halfway decent exegesis of Ephesians 5. I have personally found that reading the Bible, the whole Bible, has been a wonderfully liberating experience for me, though not without surprises along the way.

On the other hand people who do use that phrase of breaking open the word are probably onto something if, by the phrase, they liken Scripture to the sacraments. Which brings me to my third hate:

Pet hate 3. Doctrinal police who believe more than they need to about Scripture

What does the anglican in me think of Scripture? The Articles are quite reticent:

◆ *Holy Scripture contains all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.*

That's enough. Don't worry if it is inerrant or infallible or even inspired. Scripture contains some good stuff. I have the Articles on my side when I just want to use it, read it, listen to it, learn from it, indeed, receive salvation through it.

One of the great debates between conservatives and liberals last century revolved around the christological analogy for the doctrine of Scripture, i.e., whether Scripture is basically human or divine. That line of argument was pretty much discredited some 50 years ago when James Barr suggested that its basic fault was to compare a thing (Scripture) to a person (Jesus Christ)¹. But thinking about Scripture in the categories of human and divine meant that an old evangelical heavy like James Packer could box everyone up into one of the christological

¹□J. Barr, "J.K.S. Reid, 'The Authority of Scripture' 1957", *SJT* 11 (1958) 86-93.

heresies when they tried to explain their doctrine of Scripture. He accused others of being Docetists and he admitted himself to be close to Eutychian². But I will resist the temptation to get into that kind of sophisticated name-calling.

Sandra Schneiders³ finds the *sacramental* analogy for Scripture much more useful than the christological analogy. Scripture is neither a magic book any more than consecrated bread and wine have magical qualities, nor is it directly equivalent to God's word. It is the Word of God *sacramentally*. This way of speaking has been used quietly for a long time - indeed by a former Archbishop of Canterbury, Donald Coggan on *Preaching: the Sacrament of the Word*⁴. *Language is the sacrament of meaning, and Scripture, like bread and wine, is sacramentally Word, Jesus Christ. Our part is to come to the meal table expectant as we read, mark, learn and inwardly digest.*

Pet hate 4. Ministers of the Word who don't preach Scripture

I have said it is the feeding I am concerned about when I approach Scripture, not the doctrine. This has a name: performative language. Performative language tells me that my Dad was wrong when he told me names would never hurt me. Words *do* things. For example, when I say "I forgive you" I am doing more than describing a situation, I am performing the act of forgiveness.

I get annoyed to hear earnest young curates (even worse, old parish priests) who do not understand the difference between preaching and teaching. Do you know what effect your preaching is having on me? You may be wanting to *teach* me that I should be on about evangelism, but the actual effect of your words is often to make me bored or, even worse, feel guilty that I am not as earnest as you are about the topic. What I *need* your sermon to produce in me is the *inspiration to get out there and do it!*

◆ Walter Brueggemann wisely says about preaching: *Mostly I do not need more advice, but strength. I do not need more information, but the courage, freedom, and authorisation to act on what I already have been given in the gospel.*⁵

So in order to preach biblically I ask myself 'What is this passage of Scripture trying to do or effect in me?' and then I try to have the same effect on my congregation. Scripture is not just a set of ideas or propositions. It consists of stories, laws, visions, reflections, warnings, prayers, that function to shape christian identity, indeed, to transform identity. Tom Long says, "Biblical texts *say* things that *do* things, and the sermon is to say and do those things too."⁶

So how do we read the Bible for our times? I want to suggest four basic hermeneutic moves.

Hermeneutic move 1. Read the whole of Scripture

If we truly believe 2 Timothy 3:16, 'All Scripture is useful', then we will not make prejudgments about which parts of Scripture are more useful than others. We will read the lot. I have read the lot at least once in my life and can testify that reading everything the Bible had to say about women set me free.

It can be hard to read the whole at once, in fact it is impossible. In order to understand the whole we must read the parts. The point is to remain open about the meaning of the whole as this spiral of parts and whole becomes a circle of understanding. I believe that the work of Brevard Childs on canon⁷ has been greatly under-rated. He argues that the order of canonical books, have a great deal to say about their meaning.

² J.I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God. Some Evangelical Principles* (Leicester: IVF, 1958), e.g. 83-4.

³ in *The Revelatory Text. Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (2nd Ed.) (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999) 40ff.

⁴ D. Coggan, *Preaching. The Sacrament of the Word* (New York: Crossroad, 1988).

⁵ *Finally Comes the Poet* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 84.

⁶ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville KY: John Knox, Westminster, 1989), 84.

⁷ B.S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (London: SCM 1985).

I have been greatly helped by the work of John Goldingay⁸ when it comes to reading the whole of Scripture. Goldingay says that Scripture itself provides at least four main models for what it is: Witnessing Tradition, Authoritative Canon, Inspired Word, Experienced Revelation. These are not just the various genre of Scripture but the way Scripture as a whole operates on us.

Witnessing Tradition is the way in which all Scripture is a story that bears witness to God, and invites us to link on our story. *Authoritative Canon* is Scripture as a corpus of writings that bears the authority of God, that evokes delight and obedience from us. *Inspired Word* is Scripture as a word that communicates a vision of God, that invites us to face our nightmares and dream dreams. *Experienced Revelation* is Scripture as testimony of those who reflect on God that encourages us to deal with the big questions of life the universe and everything.

So our biblical sermons should aim to do at least some of these things!

By the way, one thing Scripture never does is bore me into submission or force me to obey.

Hermeneutic move 2. Let go and allow Scripture a life of its own

There is something profoundly christian in letting go. In my psyche it goes back to the Jungle Doctor stories where the monkey puts his hand in the jar of peanuts and cannot get out the door when the owner comes to kill him unless he lets go the peanuts. C.S.Lewis said somewhere that becoming a christian is like diving: you have to resist all efforts at self-preservation. This is about giving in to grace. Letting go is needed if we are to truly profit from Scripture.

There has been a lot of books written in recent years about the merging of horizons in hermeneutics. In his classic work *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, George Steiner analyses the hermeneutical process. He writes of the "hermeneutic motion, the act of elicitation and appropriative transfer of meaning" as a fourfold process of trust, penetration, embodiment, and restitution:⁹

The first step is that of *trust towards the text*, trust that there is something worth understanding, that the text is in some sense classic and has more to say to other than its original audience.¹⁰

Secondly, the interpreter aggressively brings *questions to the text*, "invades, extracts, and brings home". The text is not yet allowed to raise its own questions and concerns. Nevertheless this is an important stage since it allows for the positive type of prejudice with which we may eventually find meaning-for-ourselves in the text.¹¹

Thirdly, *the text is brought within the reader's system of thinking*. This corresponds to the merging of horizons or spiral of understanding in which the text's ideas are put into our own language.¹²

Steiner's fourth stage is especially important, viz., *stepping back from the text*. If we simply aim to merge horizons with the text we are domesticating it and bringing it within our own concerns. If this state continues, the text may never raise its own questions of us, nor challenge us about our own presuppositions.¹³

What interpreters of Scripture and preachers often do is get to step three and discover something that suits our mood, our understanding, our needs. The horizons of text and reader merge. But if God is truly to challenge us through Scripture we must go on to the fourth step. However this can be a place of grief because it means loss of certainty and control. Marcia Falk puts it more beautifully than I:

◆ Having departed from a text by deciding to translate it, by envisioning its shape and sound in language not its own, the translator's next move is toward the text again into its subtleties and details, its flaws, peculiarities, and perfections. The enveloping mists are lifted; the relationship comes down to earth; it

⁸ [M] *Models for Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

⁹ [G] G. Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, (Oxford: OUP: 1975), 296-303.

¹⁰ [ibid.], 296-7.

¹¹ [ibid.], 297-8.

¹² [ibid.], 298-300. Here Steiner compares the process to "sacramental intake or incarnation", 299.

¹³ [ibid.], 300-303.

will not do to admire at a distance any more; one must see the rocks and ravines as well as the contours of the mountains. But then, once intimacy is established, the translator leaves again, taking another step away from the text, back into the self, to begin the utterance that will be the new work. For translation too must have a life, one that breathes to its own rhythms; it cannot exist without its own nourishing atmosphere. Thus the process of translation is a to-and-fro voyage, toward and away from the shores of the text, until finally there is a new land on which to disembark.¹⁴

Theologically, this stepping back is an acknowledgment that we do not own Scripture. If it is to continue to challenge and speak to us we must set it free to do so, free even from our own embrace. It is an acknowledgment that the Church did not create the Canon, the Canon created the Church and if we give it space it will continue to create us.

My evangelical heritage taught me to love Scripture, to find in it all things necessary for salvation. But my heritage did *not* teach me to set Scripture free from my tenacious hold (and I can be tenacious).

So Scripture should be handled gently, graciously. Scripture is a means of grace to the Church. Particularly so in its written form, for in writing, an author lets go of the meaning and places it in the hands of the reader. The incarnate Word is vulnerable, capable of being misunderstood, even crucified. We readers are encouraged to be vulnerable too, to seek in our reading to hand initiative back to the text, because grace begets grace. Because letting go brings life.

Hermeneutic move 3. Draw the margins and the marginalised in to the centre

The Psalter consists of approximately 50% praise psalms and 50% lament psalms (many psalms containing elements of both). Walter Brueggemann suggests that the lament psalms are cries from the margins, from the poor, the sick, those in trouble, and those who get no justice¹⁵. Many people, if asked to name their favourite part of Scripture will name one or more of these lament psalms, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But our public worship (for quite strong liturgical and theological reasons) consists mainly of the praise psalms. Praises are the hymns that tend to uphold the status quo, suggesting that God's in his heaven and all's right with the world, and negating the need for justice for the poor, care for the sick, or prayer for the troubled among us.

The lament psalms, placed alongside the praise psalms of Scripture, demand to be used. The cries of those marginalised from our worship and church life should also be heard within our worship and church life. It should come as no surprise to find Jesus, who knew his psalms, certainly knew his laments, Jesus was in trouble from the religious establishment because of his habit of eating with the marginalised, tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners. Furthermore, Jesus died on the cross outside the city wall, marginalised from polite society. Each week we draw the symbol of this death in to the centre of our worship, believing it is not so much the symbol of death as the symbol of life. The criminal outcast is worshipped as Lord of all.

This drawing in of the margins reinforces my hermeneutical Move 1 about paying attention to *all* parts of Scripture, including - no, *especially* - the odd, sexist, racist, and apparently unhelpful parts (e.g. Texts of Terror in Judges). I have found it incredibly helpful to use some of these odd stories with clergy at retreats and conferences. I suspect they work well because they speak so loudly of dysfunctional people who long to hear that God's grace amazingly still reaches them!

Cheryl Exum¹⁶ suggest that the book of Judges has no pattern for the cycle of judges in Israel as I learnt in theological college, or only for the first couple of chapters. It very quickly dissolves into a chaos of sex, violence, and betrayal. Set before the books of Samuel and Kings, Judges may even suggest that the stories of Israel's kings has as its main theme, not some golden age, but a further descent into disobedience and despair. That is, once we draw the margins to the centre, our view of the centre itself changes.

This is exactly what feminist biblical interpreters have done, bringing women to the centre of attention and changing the church! But I want now to suggest (somewhat dangerously) that while we may have set aside Ephesians 5 for a time while women find their rightful place in church life, now it may be drawing close to a time for us to revisit that passage, to draw it to the centre of our attention and listen carefully to it once more.

For gay people in our Church, this hermeneutical move will see them brought to the very centre of Church where straights can listen to what gay exegetes see as every human being's place in God's scheme of things, rather than the usual patronising "We will let you (gays) into our (straight) church and be kind to you". Such a

¹⁴□M. Falk, *Love Lyrics from the Bible. A Translation and Literary Study of the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1982) 54-5.

¹⁵□e.g. in W. Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," *JSOT* 36 (1986) 57-71.

¹⁶□J. Cheryl Exum, "The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges" *CBQ* 52 (1990): 410-31.

statement is not only ignorantly patronising, it is also profoundly unbiblical and unjust.

Hermeneutic move 4. Read eschatologically

By this I mean, we interpret from heaven backwards, not creation forwards.

Where we are going to - heaven, the new heavens and the earth - is not just a re-run of the way it was in Creation before sin entered human life. Redemption is all that but more. So when the Sadducees propose their conundrum to Jesus about the woman with seven husbands "In the resurrection whose wife will she be?" Jesus answers "when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" and "God is God of the living". Jesus seems to suggest that although males (who give) and females (who are given) may well exist in the resurrection life, husbands and wives do not, and that the Sadducees ought to be living eschatologically.

ARCIC has developed an eschatological hermeneutic which seems to be excitingly useful. In the 2005 document: *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, they explain:

◆ C 52: For Paul especially, what it means to be fully human can only be understood rightly when it is viewed in the light of what we are to become in Christ, the 'last Adam', as opposed to what we had become in the old Adam (1 Corinthians 15:42-49, cf Romans 5:12-21). This eschatological perspective sees Christian life in terms of the vision of the exalted Christ leading believers to cast off sins that entangle (Hebrews 12:1-2) and to participate in his purity and love, made available through his atoning sacrifice (1 John 3:3, 4:10). We thus view the economy of grace from its fulfilment in Christ 'back' into history, rather than forward from its beginning in fallen creation towards the future in Christ. This perspective offers fresh light in which to consider the place of Mary.

And so ARCIC finds that some of the "problem" dogmas about Mary, e.g., the Immaculate Conception and the Bodily Assumption, fall into place:

◆ 54: Viewed eschatologically, Mary thus embodies the 'elect Israel' of whom Paul speaks - glorified, justified, called, predestined. ...56 Mary can also be seen as the faithful disciple fully present with God in Christ [assumption]... 59 Christ's redeeming work reached 'back' in Mary to the depths of her being, and to her earliest beginnings [conception]... 70 Those who are now 'with Christ', untrammelled by sin, share the unceasing prayer and praise which characterises the life of heaven... When, in the Spirit and through Christ, believers address their prayers to God, they are assisted by the prayers of other believers, especially of those who are truly alive in Christ and freed from sin [Mary's ministry of intercession].

Oh, that we would use this method more often in our ethical, ecclesiological, and evangelistic theologising: when it comes to terminal illness and old age, we could fruitfully begin by asking What does God have in store for us? When it comes to Church life and the politics of an archbishop election synod, you could give me enough courage to go on if you assure me that there will be no such politics in heaven! When it comes to salvation, we could ask 'Well, what does God desire for the whole world?' and we may be surprised by the answer.

So this evening, I invite you to

- read the whole of Scripture,
- let go and allow Scripture a life of its own,
- draw the margins and the marginalised in to the centre of church life,
- and always ask 'What shall we be like when see not in a mirror dimly but face to face and know fully even as we have been fully known?'