

TRUSTING THE BIBLE

This morning's topic is 'Trusting the Bible' – a small subject to deal with in fifteen minutes or so! Our passage is from 2 Timothy Chapter 3 verses 16 & 17. I'll read it for us now:

'All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work'.

The first statement in our passage, that 'All Scripture is God-breathed', begs the question as to how we can know this, and whether the contents of the bible can be relied upon. To begin to answer those questions let's start by considering what the Bible actually is.

The Bible, as we know it today, is a collection of 66 books which are divided into two sections. There are 39 books in the Old Testament and 27 in the New. It was written over a period of about 1,600 years by more than 40 authors, who came from very diverse backgrounds. Year in, year out, it is the best-selling book in the world, and it is estimated that around 1,250,000 bibles and testaments are sold in the UK alone each year.

Paul describes the Scriptures as 'God-breathed', which can also be translated as 'inspired by God'. In other words, Paul is saying that Scripture is God speaking but, of course, He used human agents. It is 100% the work of human beings but, Christians believe, it is also 100% inspired by God.

You may well ask: 'Who decided which books should be included in the Bible as the authoritative Word of God, and why should we accept that decision? The collective term for the 'authorised' scriptures is 'The Canon', which means 'a limited and defined group of writings which are accepted as authoritative within the Christian Church.' The New Testament Canon was 'approved' by a Church Council – the Synod of Hippo – in AD 393. But, rather than being a random decision by a random bunch of people, as one scholar comments:

'The recognition of the books of the New Testament as scriptural was overwhelmingly a natural process, not a matter of ecclesiastical regulation. The core of the New Testament was accepted so early that subsequent rulings do no more than recognise the obvious.'

In the case of the Old Testament evidence points to an established

canon before 150 BC and it is, of course, these scriptures (in the main) that Paul is referring to in his letter to Timothy. And these are the scriptures that Jesus refers to in the Gospel accounts. In John 5:39 Jesus says, 'These are the Scriptures that testify about me...' and he constantly addressed the Jewish people as if they had the Scriptures. So, it is very clear that Jesus regarded the Old Testament as authentic – and He should know!

There isn't time to consider the Old Testament further here, except to say that some scholars believe that it contains more than 300 prophecies about Jesus, some of which are very specific. To take just three:

1. It was prophesied that his would be a virgin birth.
2. It was prophesied that he would be born in Bethlehem.
3. It was prophesied that Jesus's hands and feet would be pierced – in effect the manner of his death, by crucifixion, was prophesied long before that method of execution was invented by the Romans.

St Augustine is quoted as saying. 'The Old is in the New revealed, the New is in the Old concealed'. Taken with Jesus's assertion that the Old Testament provides testimony about Him, I think we can conclude that the whole of the Old Testament narrative points to the most important event in history – the implementation of God's salvation plan through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. History is, in fact, 'His- Story'. At its heart, Christianity claims that something extraordinary happened in the course of time – something concrete, real, and historical.

The New Testament declares that Jesus was born to a virgin, claimed to be God, did miracles like walking on water and raising people from the dead, was crucified on a Roman cross, then rose from the dead and ascended into heaven to reign as King of the universe. The four gospels give an account of Jesus's life and ministry, so a vital question to ask is, 'Are these documents truly reliable, historically speaking'? It may come as a shock to some that the manuscript tradition of the New Testament stands up to rigorous scrutiny. I'm constantly amazed at the prevalent view, among many of my friends and acquaintances, that the Gospels are largely mythological and with very little historical reality. Digging a little deeper I usually find that, apart from a few half-remembered stories from childhood, many people have never actually read a gospel account, so I always encourage them to read the Gospel of Luke and then Acts of the Apostles. Reading these, and examining them in detail, was a very important step in my own journey to faith.

As with other ancient books, the physical pieces of "paper" on which the original authors first wrote the New Testament have been lost, but we have over 5,000 original language copies, many going back to the first three centuries. By contrast, for Julius Caesar's Gallic Wars we have, at most, ten readable copies, the earliest of which dates nine hundred years after Caesar's time. Comparing ancient copies of the New Testament content with each other reveals a remarkably stable history of copy-making. The bible, and the New Testament in particular, has been subjected to a vast amount of scrutiny over several hundred years and most biblical scholars would accept that the New Testament that we have now is, to all intents and purposes, the same as when the different texts that make up its content were originally written.

That's all very well, you might say, but can we determine whether the authors were reliable witnesses? Well, for a start, we have multiple authors writing about the life of Jesus, including Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Paul, and these sources are all very early. Most scholars date the Gospels to the 60s, 70s and 80s AD, although some argue that Mark's gospel was written within a decade of Jesus. Another very early witness is Paul, the author of our passage today, who wrote his letters between AD48 & AD 65, well within the lifetimes of the eyewitnesses. Why is this important?

Well, it's now fairly universally accepted that the Gospel writers were trying to write history. Both John & Matthew were apostles, who were with Jesus during his earthly ministry, and Mark is generally accepted as a companion of the apostle Peter. Luke accompanied Paul on various of his journeys and is generally regarded as a first-rate historian. His introduction sets out his purpose:

'Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those **who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word**. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you..... so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught'.

It's fair to say that the Bible is a reliable historical record of what these authors believe happened. But did those things really happen? After all, the Bible is filled with stories of miracles that invite our natural scepticism. These appear essential to the Bible's message, and their eyewitness accounts come across far more plausibly, as events that actually took place, than 'miracles' found in ancient myths and legends.

One miracle lies at the heart of the Bible, and is central to the whole of history – namely the resurrection of Jesus. If the biblical writers were genuinely mistaken about that, it's unlikely they were right about much else! If Jesus is still dead then he is not the "Christ" the Bible speaks of, and that he claimed to be.

Much historical analysis has been undertaken about what happened at Jesus's tomb and many theories abound. We don't have time to go into these here, but I think it is fair to say that the main theories – that Jesus nearly died, or that it was a hoax, deception or mass hallucination involving his followers – don't hold water. His followers' insistence that they had found his tomb empty and saw the risen Jesus – a belief they held onto even at the cost of their lives – is explained by only one possibility: Jesus was bodily, historically resurrected from the dead.

For me, the dramatic transformation of the apostle Peter, from denying Jesus three times (and the only person who could have provided that information was Peter himself, thereby adding to the 'warts and all' authenticity of the Gospel accounts) to the Peter who, after receiving the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, stood before the ruling Jewish council of the Sanhedrin and accused them of crucifying the Messiah, was a hugely significant part of my journey to faith. What could have brought about this astonishing transformation, other than the fact that Peter had met the risen Jesus?

Because of the resurrection, Christians believe what Jesus said. And since Jesus himself endorsed the entire Old Testament and, in effect, authorized the entire New Testament, Christians believe that the Bible is reliable and true. St John said of his New Testament writings: 'These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name'.

I hope that this whistle stop tour will have given you enough to see that there are very good reasons for trusting the bible, and accepting that it is inspired by God. If you want to delve deeper into this subject I can thoroughly recommend a book called 'Why Trust the Bible', by Amy Orr-Ewing, daughter of a former Rector of this church. For a detailed examination of the resurrection, I recommend a superb book, first published in 1930 by Frank Morison, called 'Who Moved the Stone'. I haven't even mentioned the external references to historic events contained in the Bible, or the many instances where the archaeological record endorses the biblical text – another whole subject for study!

If we accept that the Bible is indeed the 'Word of God', what are we to make of it? As St Paul says in our passage, it is 'useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness'. In other words, it's a comprehensive 'instruction manual' for how we should live our lives. It's perhaps ironic that so much of that 'instruction manual' that we look to today was written by Paul himself, inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The Bible offers guidance on pretty much every area of life and we should reference any decision we make or action we take against that guidance.

The Bible is the main way that God speaks to us today, through the Holy Spirit. The author of the letter to the Hebrews says: 'For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword. It penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.'

It has certainly been my experience, on many occasions, that a word or a verse leaps off the page when I am reading the Bible – sometimes to bring conviction of sin; sometimes to bring confirmation of a course of action, and often to bring reassurance and encouragement.

The Bible has been described as God's love letter to mankind and, in its pages, we learn about the grand sweep of God's salvation plan, culminating in Jesus's death on the cross out of love for you and for me. In the face of such love, it is surely incumbent on us to take his Word seriously and devote time to reading and studying it.

There are many ways that we can do this. One that I have found incredibly helpful is the Bible in One Year App from the Alpha Organisation. This provides a passage from the Psalms or Proverbs, and one from each of the Old & New Testaments, together with a brief commentary and prayers. My best friend, Chris, and I committed ourselves about ten years ago to reading through the bible each year, using this App. I had an email from him only last month saying 'It always amazes me that the Bible in One Year is so relevant to what is going on at the time!'

Amen – let's pray.