

Easter 3 Evening – Reading the Bible Faithfully and Responsibly

This sermon draws significantly on Mark Achtmeier's book "The Bible's Yes to Same-Sex Marriage - An Evangelical's Change of Heart" Westminster John Knox Press Louisville Kentucky 2014.

There are people who say you can make the Bible say whatever you want ... so they approach the Bible with a lot of scepticism, in a way as irrelevant, a collection of sayings, of wisdom.

On the other hand there are people who say that the Bible is clear in what it says and you only need to do what it says ... so they approach the Bible with a lot of trust, and often defend particular interpretations with fervour.

Most of us, I imagine, are somewhere in the spectrum between.

Then there are people who make it sound as if only scholars will ever understand what the Bible says, that you need to have a degree in Biblical studies to truly understand. That can have the effect of discouraging people from reading the Bible. This can be a Presbyterian problem, because we put emphasis on scholarship.

Reformed churches put great stress on the Bible.

And through the Reformation, the Church emphasised that everyone is able to read and understand the Bible and learn what God is saying to us through it.

That is our heritage.

The Westminster Confession, our subordinate standard, says that the Bible contains the Word of God, that when we read the Bible we can encounter Jesus Christ, who is the Word of God.

The Bible is not the Word of God; it contains the Word of God.

The Bible is like an earthen vessel that contains treasure, a means by which Jesus Christ can be revealed to us.

The Holy Spirit goes between us and the page we read, as a light that shines on the page, helping us see Jesus.

Whatever approach we take, it is essential that people who want to follow Jesus read and study the Bible.

We do it because one of the big challenges we face as Christians is to avoid becoming mirrors of the society around us, only absorbing and perpetuating what our society values or does not value, thus offering no real alternative to the violence and self-destructiveness of our society.

Our challenge has always been to offer something refreshingly different, in order that our world may be more than it is, more just and peaceful.

But to do that our imagination needs nourishing, so that we see what we need to see, and hear what we need to hear, and attend to what we need to attend.

So reading the Bible faithfully and responsibly is extremely important for us.

So I want to offer some principles for reading the Bible, drawn from Mark Achtmeier's book.

In 177, the church in Lyons in France was in crisis. Pothinus, the very first Christian bishop of the city, had been slaughtered in a persecution carried out by the Roman authorities. So the church appointed Irenaeus to replace him.

Irenaeus was determined to be a faithful guide and defender of the congregations in his care. He discovered the threats were internal, not just external. A rival system of teaching had arisen: Valentinian Gnosticism. The Gnostics supported their teaching with snippets from the Bible without reference to their context or order. Irenaeus used the image of a mosaic. Imagine an artist had laid out precious coloured stones into a beautiful mosaic portrait of the king. Then imagine someone took the stones and reassembled them into an entirely different portrait, of a dog. And then they said to everyone "Behold the king!" Irenaeus pointed out that although every stone of the original mosaic of the king was used, although it was claimed that the mosaic was of the king, it was no longer a picture of the king in any meaningful way. That, said Irenaeus, is what the Valentinians do with the Bible. Every single passage is true and authentic, but they have lifted each passage out of its context and rearranged them.

So the Bible has been used to justify slavery, apartheid, discrimination against women and the condemnation of gay and lesbian relationships.

How can we avoid doing the same?

By doing what Irenaeus did, looking at the big picture, at the overall mosaic, the original picture of the king.

Some Principles

1. Interpretations need to be coherent and make good sense

Faithful interpretations needed to make coherent and good sense. The reasons for God's commands need to be understandable.

Imagine if the Bible did not make sense. Imagine if we simply did what each verse said even if it was an arbitrary commandment. Imagine if the various passages and commandments had no obvious rhyme or reason, or if they did not appear to serve some useful purpose. Imagine if they produced harmful or nonsensical results as a test of our faith.

There are churches in the Appalachians which have taken seriously the reference to snake handling, for example. So in their services they handle snakes, because it is a way of showing how Jesus protects them.

We need then to look behind the passage to the overall pattern.

We need to be careful how we use the Bible to condemn gay and lesbian relationships, for example. It can have terrible consequences for many people. People we love can be denied the possibility of a faithful, loving, committed relationship. Young people can end up anguishing so much about their sexual inclinations that they develop self-destructive behaviours, and some kill themselves.

One writer says this –

“Treating biblical sexual regulations as arbitrary expressions of divine authority imbues them with a kind of radioactive aura that can do enormous spiritual damage to those who, even once, yield to temptation and fall short. Devout young people finding themselves in such situations may feel they have sinned irreversibly, that this was the greatest of all sins, that they have been relegated to a lower class of Christian.”

Any adequate interpretation of the Bible’s moral teaching will include not just rules or principles for guiding behaviour, but an understanding of the reasons why such principles make sense.

The danger of slippery slopes is often highlighted, if we give in on homosexuality then what else will we give in to, bestiality, an argument used by a politician in Australia.

The slippery slope argument relies on the idea that there are arbitrary instructions in the Bible. It doesn’t work if you understand there are reasonable and understandable arguments for why we should do some things beyond the passage or instruction itself.

God is not a meaningless tyrant requiring us to behave a certain way without reason. A good test of whether we have understood the Bible’s teaching correctly is whether we can discern the loving reasons that stand behind it.

The reading from John is about the divine logos, the divine wisdom, embodied in Jesus Christ. In him human nature and divine rationality are drawn together. Early Greek theologians saw humans as “logikos”, rational creatures made in the image of the divine word, the divine logos.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your mind.”

2. Christ-Centred Interpretation

Any correct understanding of the Bible should be grounded and centred in Christ.

If our goal is to keep a particular reading of the Bible’s teaching grounded in the big picture, then that big picture is, for us, Jesus Christ. He is the central reference point. He is the underlying mosaic.

So if a particular reading fails to make sense in the light of Jesus Christ, the central reference point, that is a sign we have misunderstood the Bible’s teaching.

3. We interpret scripture by scripture

We keep in mind the big picture by seeing how it is in tune with, or at odds with, the rest of the Bible. If a particular passage is giving us trouble, then we need to seek help from other, clearer parts of the Bible.

The Bible presents us with a particular view of or particular views of God, especially of God’s love in Jesus Christ. So if certain passages end up leading us to condemn groups of people, we need to wonder why that seems inconsistent with God’s love in Jesus Christ for all people that is a major feature of other parts of the Bible.

4. We interpret passages in context

We need to interpret particular passages of the Bible in their biblical and historical contexts, in their settings.

So we need to learn as much as we can about the historical circumstances in which the passage was first written and heard so that we get a sense of what it meant to the original hearers.

For example, there are passages that appear to endorse slavery. However, if we take seriously the historical context of such passages, we will realise these words were written to members of an ancient Greco-Roman society wholly dependent on slavery for its economic survival. They had never thought of abolishing slavery. No one could imagine such a reform would even be possible. In this respect, the absence of objection to slavery reflects the time-bound nature of the Bible, not a timeless outline of God's will.

5. Understanding the purpose of the lawgiver

It is a principle of legal interpretation to understand the intention of the parliament in passing a law. It is called legislative intent. John Calvin highlights this principle in relation to interpreting the Ten Commandments, for example. So when we are reading the Bible, we are trying to understand something of the intent behind a particular passage or a particular verse, beyond the actual words themselves. When we are considering equal marriage, for example, instead of just looking at particular passages, we need to look beyond those passages to see what was their intent. What was God trying to accomplish for men and women in their relationships?

Five principles then for reading the Bible, and underlying them all the mosaic which gives each part meaning.