

Can You Believe the Bible?

Can you believe the Bible? This is the third talk in our Christian basics for Epiphany series. There are three misguided views about the Bible. A great number of misguided Christians think that it is literally true, word for word. And then there are the book publishers who treat the Bible as if it were some sort of occult text like *Old Moore's Almanack* or conspiracy theory designed to make money like *The Da Vinci Code*. Then there are those who think Scripture is primitive bunkum – that is all the newspapers, the *cool, no probs* fashionistas who read nothing except airport novels: Oh, and there's Richard Dawkins as well.

The fact is you can't expect to open the Bible at random and take a verse out of its context. There is a story of a bloke who did this. He was depressed so he opened the New Testament. Unfortunately, at the verse which said *Judas went out and hanged himself*. Poor chap, he quickly shut the book and tried again. This time the verse said *Go and do thou likewise*.

The Bible is not bunkum. It is not true in the way that a motor cycle manual is true. It is not a diagram. It is a picture. Much of the Bible is myth. Now when the newspapers or the golly gosh documentary mongers on TV talk about myth, they mean a made up story that's a load of nonsense – stuff that *primitive* people used to believe before intelligent people like themselves came along and knew better. But a myth is not nonsense. A myth is a truth. It is truth for people with imagination. A myth is a picture for those who have got past the stage of painting by numbers.

Myths have ways of being true that creep up on you. The first chapter of *Genesis* for example where creation begins with *Let there be light*. Has it really taken until Albert Einstein to tell us that, yes, as a matter of fact, *light is* the unifying constant in a universe where everything else is relative. Actually, no, it has not taken as long as that. Joseph Haydn got there before Albert. In *The Creation* Haydn repeats the *Genesis* message about creation and light. And he does it in one brilliant chord of C-major.

Does the Bible foretell the future? We must answer, Yes. Seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah said, *Behold a Virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel*. A hundred years later another Isaiah wrote: *He is despised and rejected of men...he was wounded for our transgressions...he was bruised for our iniquities...and by his stripes we are healed*.

So there you have it. The birth and death of Christ prophesied hundreds of years before the events. There's no doubt about this. It was written down centuries before Christ. It's on the record. Of course, when those prophecies were written they were directed at events in the prophet's own day. He probably did not actually foresee the coming of Christ. But that's how prophecy works. It is a poetic co-operation between the present and the future. Let me give you another example – of a frightening sort. *The Revelation of St John the Divine, chapter 8:*

And there fell a great star from heaven. And the third part of the sun was smitten. And the name of the star is called Wormwood; and the waters became wormwood and

many men died of the waters. And a great mountain burning with fire was cast into the sea and the third part of the sea was made blood. And the moon and the sun and the stars were darkened and the day shone not for the third part of it.

Of course, no one is saying that St John precisely saw the atomic bomb, poisoned water, radiation sickness and a nuclear winter. But if – when? – these things come to pass, might not survivors (if there are any) open his prophecy and discern that something very much like that prophesied had taken place?

Let me say something else about the way in which the Bible is true. But first I must tell you it was my birthday and I was having a bath to celebrate. I had the wireless by the bath and they announced the afternoon short story. Normally when I hear this announced, I switch off faster than when it's that quaint mixture of rustic dysfunctionalism and political-correctness *The Archers* or the relentlessly gay giggling of Ned Sherrin's friends. But I must have slipped on the soap and missed the off switch. Anyhow, the reader was telling me about her *peaceful* haven and about notes in a *rising* crescendo – as if you could have a cacophonous haven or a diminishing crescendo. That story was an example of what all bad writing is: pudding over-egged.

For *haven means peaceful*. And a *crescendo is something that rises in volume*. *Don't* says Ezra Pound say *EMPTY desert*. *The object is the adequate image*. The biblical writers needed no instruction from Uncle Ezra. There is no over-egging in the Bible. *The object is the adequate image* No gilding the lily. No attempt to create an effect. You just get *behold a valley of dry bones*. And immediately you see a forest of corpses rising to meet you. In the gospels when they talk of the Sea of Galilee or the Mount of Olives there's no travel writing. Yet the scene presented is larger than life. There is not one word describing what Jesus looked like. There is no lurid Danielle Steele historical Cinemascope of the décor in the manger. And no pornographic, Patricia Cornwell style description of the Crucifixion.

All this indubitable reality in few words, and a miraculous sense of presence is achieved. This is specially so in our English Bible and in Luther's German Bible. And this is because they were translations made when English and German were at their freshest. And the Bible is so near to us it gets under our skin because we have grown up with it, imbibed it by repetition until it is impossible to separate the words of the bible from our own consciousness – from our own very identity and being. This is deliberate on God's part and it is why we are commanded to *read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the scriptures*. *Imbibe* I said. *Imbibe*. Yes, and even the health supplements know that *you are what you eat*. Read the Bible then. Listen to the Bible. And the Bible will become part of you. And so you will become the Bible. This is why the Bible is described as meat and drink. The Bible lands are our interior spiritual landscape

But there is something even more important. The Bible is *spiritually true*. Let me put this in words that even devotees of the police dramas on TV can understand. When it comes to saying what human beings are really like deep down, the Bible *has us bang to rights*. *For he knoweth whereof we are made. He knoweth we are but dust*. There are scores of examples to demonstrate the truth of this, but I've time for only one. What is the basis of human psychology? What is our motivation like? What do we

really want? How do we really behave every day? And St Paul answers: *The thing I would, I do not; and what I would not, that I do.*

There you have it in fourteen words of one syllable: the doctrine of Original Sin; the definition of human personality. At odds with ourselves. Willing to do good but failing to do it. Willing to avoid evil– perhaps even desperately at times – but constantly falling into sin. The Bible again: *The dog returns to its vomit.*

But – and this is the glorious bit – because the Bible has us bang to rights about our fallen nature, we can trust it when it tells us we shall be redeemed. For Scripture which says *As in Adam all die* goes on to say in the very next breath *so in Christ shall all be made alive.* Because the Bible is reliable when it talks about earthly things – death, worms, sin and vomit – we can trust the Bible when it tells us of heaven. He said: *Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world... I am the Good Shepherd, I lay down my life for the sheep... I go to prepare a place for you, that where I am there ye may be also.*

That's the Bible for you. And you *can* believe it.