

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

'On not reading the Bible Flat'

5 of Easter C.

May 19th 2019

Acts 11.1-18

John 13.31-35

Christians don't live by taking every word of the Bible at face value as infallibly true and of equal value with all the rest of it.

I hope that shouldn't be a controversial statement, because, even when Jesus said, *'one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God'* (Mt. 4.4), it was in the middle of his struggle with the devil – and one of the things the devil precisely was doing was to quote verses from the Bible to tempt Jesus to do the wrong thing. So it's clear that 'living by every word that comes from the mouth of God' doesn't mean taking every word of Scripture at face value, regardless of circumstance or context. Hearing and applying God's word – his message- has to be more considered and thoughtful than that.

But whether we've thought about it in depth or not, I think we all have the sense that some bits of the Bible are less important to us than others – let's be honest. There's a story of prisoners of the Japanese during WWII who had a meagre amount of tobacco, but no

rolling papers to make cigarettes. But they had one of those old bibles printed on thin India paper. So they consulted a clergyman among them – I think it was the heroic Bishop of Singapore, Leonard Wilson (who later became Bishop of Birmingham) – as to whether it would be all right to use bible for that purpose. And he told them that it was – but they should perhaps start with the book of Leviticus.

I guess that most of us don't read Leviticus very much, and if we do, we feel that all its laws about sacrifices, and what is clean and unclean don't matter very much to us – and in this we follow the general belief of the Church down the ages – that since Christ has offered the once-for-all, final sacrifice to bring people to God, the ritual law of the Old Covenant doesn't have force for his followers. Which isn't to say that there's nothing of significance in Leviticus at all: in fact, what we call 'Our Lord's Summary of the Law' – that we should love God with heart and soul, mind and strength, and our neighbours as ourselves - was in fact drawn by Jesus out of verses in Leviticus.

But you get the point – not *all* of the Bible seems so important as God's word to us in our lives as Christians. We don't, as some people put it, 'read the Bible flat' - as all on a par. And this true at least partly because of the incident we heard about in our first reading today. Through his remarkable dream, and the extraordinary 'coincidence' (some would term that a 'God-

incidence') of messengers for Cornelius turning up immediately after it, Peter was learning that the laws of ritual impurity which would have prevented him from going into the house of Gentiles and eating with them were being overridden in the new, post-Resurrection dispensation. It was a very hard lesson for him to learn and for others to accept; the story tells us that the assembled leaders of the Christian community in Jerusalem were very critical of Peter's action in going to see Cornelius at first; but Peter's account of the Spirit's wonderful work overcame the criticism. But, years later, the force of habitual belief among Christians of Jewish origin was so strong that messengers were being sent from Jerusalem to Paul's new churches in Asia Minor and Greece to tell them to conform to Jewish ways – even that Gentile believers should be circumcised – and Peter himself was having a wobble, and withdrawing from eating with Gentile Christians. Even with the force of Paul's personality set against this tendency to revert to the old ideas of ritual law, we just don't know how long the controversy rumbled on in one form or another. It took centuries, and some very bright theological minds, to clarify the difference between the ritual law and the moral law of the Old Testament – to say why one wasn't applicable to us, but the other, (the Ten Commandments condensed into the law of love), is at the very heart of our faith.

So, Christians can argue about what the Scriptures mean to us for a long time. Indeed, as my old teacher, Stephen Sykes wrote, the Church is, and always will be a community in which important things are contested. Simply quoting the Bible doesn't necessarily resolve the conflict. We're like a huge family spanning the centuries, a family of many nations and cultures. We all share a family history, which is a history of what it is to be in touch with the living God ; we all know that that trunk in the attic, containing all sorts of materials - letters, diaries, news cuttings, poetry, reflective writings by past family members, records of conversations with our common ancestor – that family archive which we call the Bible, is unique and irreplaceable. It catches the essence of our shared experience. and we want to make the coming generations familiar with it, and be familiar with it ourselves. But it's unsurprising that we differ about which items are the most important, whether they're all accurate and fully informed pictures of what was going on in the past, how much they're influenced by the widely different personalities and cultures of those who wrote them, and how the various items should be interpreted - not excluding the question as to which ones make most sense of our lives now.

We disagree, sometimes very sharply – but the thing is that makes us all Christians is our disagreements are about the central things – what it means to recognise

Christ as Saviour, and how we should live in the light of that.

Yes, there has always been disagreement within the Christian community which we call the church, and slow processes of clarification, such as that which led of the Testament and the enduring moral law of love. The Church of past ages has given useful signposts to map our way through modern disputes, but that doesn't stop us from living in an age where disagreements are every bit as sharp and deep as that within the early Church over how much it should remain a Jewish sect, keeping the whole law, and how much it should break free from that and embrace the Gentiles.

Did you know that recently leading figures within the Roman Catholic church, including an influential theologian from Cambridge, have written an open letter accusing Pope Francis of heresy? This is because he's suggested that there might be times and ways in which it would be right to admit Catholics who have divorced and remarried to receive Communion. Here, it's not a teaching from the Old Testament ritual law which is at issue, but words of Jesus himself in the Gospels about the indissolubility of marriage. Do his words constitute the basis for a total ban on Communion for divorced and remarried persons? Is it really the most loving thing to do to uphold this ban and avoid 'confusion' for the faithful? Or, on the other

hand, from Pope Francis' point of view, does the nature of God revealed by Christ as a merciful Saviour, a physician for wounded souls, suggest that total bans and fixed rules only result in cutting off the medicine of mercy from people who need it?

Within our own denomination we had exactly the same dispute not so very long ago, although it may seem an age away from how we think now, because generally we've resolved this argument on the side of mercy as Pope Francis would understand it; I'm sure each of us knows what we think and feel about that. But we also know that there are other painful disputes which still grind on in our Anglican Communion and the wider church, particularly about sexual issues, with people of great integrity on each side, and part of the disagreement is about the relative value of different parts of the Bible, and what it means to embody and share the experience of living close to God now.

It may seem very discouraging to think that the Church will never agree with itself. It may even seem very tempting to hive off into a small version of the Church where everyone *will* agree, so we can get on with being an impressive missionary force. But I think we have to remember that when Paul told the Philippian Christians to be of 'one mind', what he was primarily recommending was an attitude of humility which reckons others better than ourselves. Might that even include holding the thought that those we most

disagree with might possibly be the very ones the Holy Spirit wants to use, so that we'll find enlightenment together as we seek to interpret the word of God coming to us through the Bible. The Bible is, after all, the book of the whole Christian community, however confused or fractious we may seem about its meaning.