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**The Word of the Lord?
Making the Bible Make Sense**

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The Word of the Lord?- Making the Bible Make Sense

Sunday by Sunday many of us sit in churches and hear selected chunks of scripture read out to us. And that's usually OK because the lectionary usually chooses quite straightforward chunks; but there are still occasional surprises. Not long ago I had the experience of sitting in a congregation when Numbers 15 was appointed to be read. Numbers 15 as I'm sure you remember is the story of a poor little Israelite man who went out into the desert one night to collect sticks to keep warm. Only he'd forgotten it was the sabbath, and so got arrested by the guards. "And so", the reader solemnly proclaimed, "the guards dragged the man before Moses and Aaron, who said, 'This man is a sabbath-breaker; he must put to death. Let him be stoned by all the community outside the camp'. So they took him outside and they stoned him with stones as Moses and Aaron commanded, until he was dead.... *This is the word of the Lord*". And we all replied: "*Thanks be to God!*"

The most disturbing thing was that nobody turned a hair. Worse still, when the preacher referred to the passage in his sermon, he simply took it at face value. It didn't occur to him to ask *in what sense* this rather savage little tale is supposed to be 'The word of the Lord', or to question what on earth it is meant to tell us about God's nature.

I have been in church on one occasion when someone's conscience rebelled. In my last parish we had a splendid lady called Elsie. Elsie was a reader in church, and not a woman to be trifled with. One morning she got up to read the Epistle at the eucharist, and it was one of those bits of St Paul about the subordination of women and how women must obey their husbands and so on. So Elsie read it deadpan, in her rather posh and powerful voice. And at the end she looked up at the congregation and said, 'I shall NOT say 'This is the word of the Lord', for it plainly is not. It is simply St Paul being silly'.

Well, I sympathise with Elsie, because it's a real question whether we should say at the end of every chunk of scripture 'this is the word of the Lord', because sometimes it just *doesn't* make sense. The trouble with saying 'This is the Word of the Lord' after one bit of scripture, is that it gives the impression that we are supposed to take each and every part of the Bible as a literal, direct message from God to us now. And that is clearly wrong. Scripture is certainly the vehicle of God's word, but it's not the same as being God's word.

Ultimately for a Christian there is only one Word of the Lord, and that's Jesus, the Living Word; and he comes to us through the written words of scripture, yes, but also through prayer, church, sacrament, conscience, reason, experience and other people.

That's why I'm unhappy about saying 'This is the word of the Lord' after individual readings. It might be truer to say that the Whole Bible, taken together, is the Word of the Lord because then each bit is corrected by the perspective of the whole, but even then, one still needs one's reason and a lot of knowledge to work out what the perspective is.

And the fact is, people are terribly ignorant about the Bible. At the most basic level people still need to understand that the Bible isn't a book, but 84 books, including the Apocrypha, written across the space of maybe a thousand years.

And across all these different books, and often within individual books, quite fundamental beliefs keep changing. From author and author, from book to book and sometimes from verse to verse we can move between between polytheism and monotheism; between polygamy and monogamy; between the anthropomorphic God of Genesis and the universal Lord of Second Isaiah; between animal sacrifice and repudiation of animal sacrifice; between

tribal morality and individual morality; and between belief in an afterlife and disbelief in an afterlife.

These differences and contradictions are more marked within the Old Testament than the New because it covers so much more historical ground, but there are plenty of differences and contradictions in the New Testament too, as we shall see.

So you can't just pick up the Bible and expect to make sense of it, unless you are prepared to find out about the background that individual texts are coming from. Where is this author coming from in history, place, social setting, religious tradition? What are the relations between the different authors and texts? Who has been editing whom and why? What theological or political purpose does this writer have? Who was paying him? What are his biases, what axe has he got to grind? What are the literary forms and conventions which shaped what he wrote and the way he wrote it?

Theologians use grand names for these different kinds of investigation - "form criticism", "redaction criticism", "genre criticism", and so on - but they all boil down to common-sense questions which actually must be asked before we can place a passage in context and extract its meaning.

The worrying thing is that, in most of what passes for 'Bible study' in churches and schools, and in all the University Christian Unions I have known, those questions are never asked. And if you do ask them you'll soon be labelled an unsound, unbiblical, dangerous liberal, and if you persist you'll be out on your ear. But the truth is if you don't ask them you will never make sense of the Bible at all. Because if you simply take the text at face value, not asking these things, then very often you will miss or mistake its real meaning completely.

And I really want to spend the rest of the time galloping through some examples of how this works. I also hope to show how this process of asking the Bible questions and finding out literally where the different bits of it are coming from, so far from undermining your faith, actually enriches it and makes it real.

1. Many Bible texts have been edited and re-edited to suit changed circumstances and new ideas, and often don't make sense if we don't grasp this.

I remember sitting in Tonyrefail Parish Church when I was about fourteen and getting annoyed by Psalm 51, and the fact it doesn't make sense. Psalm 51 is a very beautiful psalm of penitence: 'have mercy upon me O Lord after thy great goodness, according to the multitude of thy mercies do away mine offences'...

One of the main themes in it is that God doesn't want animal sacrifices, he wants obedience and devotion. 'Thou desirest no sacrifice else would I give it thee, but thou delightest not in burnt offerings.... The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit, a broken contrite heart O God shalt thou not despise'.

We read this, and think, 'Yes, great, that makes sense; of course God doesn't want all this blood sacrifice stuff'. But then we come to the last two verses and the psalm does a complete volte-face:

'O be favourable and gracious unto Sion. Build thou the walls of Jerusalem. Then shalt thou be pleased with the sacrifice of righteousness, the burnt offerings and oblations. Then shall they offer young bullocks upon thine altar'.

And we think 'Hang on! But he has just said God doesn't want blood sacrifice! Why has he changed his mind two verses later? It doesn't make sense.

And it doesn't make sense, unless you realise there are two bits of this psalm dating from two different periods. The bulk of it comes from the exilic period after the Babylonians invaded, destroyed the Jerusalem temple and took all the upper- and middle-class Jews off to Babylon. Since sacrifice could only be offered in the Temple, that put an end to animal sacrifice. So the Jews in Babylon developed a new theology of spiritual sacrifice. And so you get Psalm 40, psalm 50 psalm 51, all of which teach that God doesn't want animal sacrifice:

' Do you think that I will eat the flesh of bulls and drink the blood of goats? (says Psalm 50). If I were hungry I would not tell you!'

So from our point of view you might say that during the exile there was a great leap forward from the idea of blood sacrifice to spiritual sacrifice.

But then there was a great leap back. A few generations later under the Persians imperial policy changed. The Jews were allowed home to Jerusalem, and under Ezra and Nehemiah they rebuilt the city and the Temple, and the whole sacrificial business started up again.

So the last two verses of Psalm 51 were bolted on to the rest of the Psalm by a different author, attempting to update it in a rather clumsy way to fit the new situation where sacrifice had come back. But as I say, unless you know that, the thing is just incoherent, even to a fourteen year old know-all in Tonyrefail.

But that is only one of countless examples. You get the same experience reading most books of the Bible.

Isaiah is a good example. Isaiah has at least two and probably more authors. The original Isaiah wrote in the eighth century BC under threat from the Assyrian Empire. But then a couple of centuries later, in a similar context of threat from the Babylonian Empire, someone thought it would be a good idea to update Isaiah to fit the new situation. So from Chapter 40 on we get Second Isaiah; and towards the end, though this isn't quite so clear, there seems to be a third Isaiah contributing a bit from the post-exilic period.

It's not that Second and Third Isaiah were trying to fool anyone. They probably belonged to a school of scribes, who genuinely believed they were writing in the spirit of Isaiah, to adapt his wisdom to a new crisis.

Modern biblical scholarship began when German theologians in the nineteenth century realised that the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses, couldn't possibly be written by Moses, but could be assigned to various authors writing at different periods.

Since then scholars have argued about which bits belong where, but everyone accepts that these books were written and re-edited over centuries. And if you don't realise that, you will be constantly surprised by non-sequiturs and contradictions.

For example right at the start of Genesis, we have the account of God making the world in seven days culminating in the creation of man and woman. But if you read on to chapter 2 verse 4, we start all over again with an alternative creation story, in a different order, with the creation of man at the start. Two quite different creation stories by different writers dates have simply been shoved together. How many people know that?

The same thing happens in the New Testament. The Gospel of John is a good example, because it has clearly been written by at least two authors, and quite probably by a committee. For a start, it has two endings. In chapter 20, after the resurrected Christ appears three times in Jerusalem, the chapter ends with the words:

Jesus did many other signs which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, and that believing you may have life in his name.

That is almost certainly the original ending of the Gospel. But then we get chapter 21, and for no apparent reason the disciples have gone back to their old job as fishermen, and there is a different account of the resurrection as if the one in chapter 20 had never happened.

Clearly chapter 21 has been tacked on to include a different tradition, and also to tidy up some loose ends. In particular it allows Jesus to rehabilitate Peter. 'Simon do you love me?' He asks three times, to cancel Peter's threefold denial, and then says 'Feed my sheep', making it clear that Peter is still chief apostle.

There's lots more evidence in John of this rather clumsy editing, and you can account for it in different ways. Bultmann thought the original John's Gospel was doctored by an ecclesiastical editor in order to make it more acceptable to the official church.

Other scholars like Cullmann think there was a 'Johannine circle' of writers, a bit like the Isaiah circle, which as well as editing the Gospel went on over time to write the Revelation of John and the Letters of John. That would explain why we have these different books attributed to John, which are strongly linked and yet are very different, and from different periods.

2. The Bible rarely 'solves problems' or gives us authoritative answers on a plate. More often we are overhearing an argument between two or more views.

During the period when the New Testament was written, the main source of division was about how Jewish the Christian Church was going to be. The problem was there almost from day 1, because we know the apostles themselves quarrelled about it. In Galatians 2, Paul tells that he had a stand-up row with Peter about this in front of the Church at Antioch. According to Paul, Peter had at first agreed with him that Gentile converts should not be required to obey the Jewish law but should be accepted on an equal basis. But apparently Peter had gone back on this, and Paul was incandescent with rage. Paul also had rows with other apostles who were insisting that Gentiles should get circumcised or keep the food laws.

So it is not surprising that there are also real differences between the Gospels on this issue, and especially between Mark and Matthew.

Mark, remember, is the earliest Gospel, written around 70 AD, probably for a mainly Gentile Church, quite possibly in Rome. That is why Mark explains Jewish customs, like the Corban rule, or the rite of washing. Matthew was written later, for a mainly Jewish church. What makes the comparison interesting is that we

know Matthew was copying Mark. Matthew uses about 90 per cent of Mark's material. But he inserts into it 5 big blocks of Jesus teaching which Mark didn't have. The number five is probably significant, recalling Moses and the Pentateuch, because for Matthew Jesus is very much the new Moses. Matthew also adds a beginning and an ending, the story of Jesus birth and the story of his resurrection, which were also not in Mark.

So – Matthew reproduces most of Mark, but every so often he changes it; and every time he does so, changes it back in the direction of Judaism and the law. In Mark chapter 7, for example, we are clearly told that Jesus declared all foods clean. But when Matthew comes to that bit, he leaves it out. There was definitely no bacon for breakfast in Matthew's church.

Mark tells us that Jesus picked some corn on the sabbath, and said, 'The sabbath was made for man not man for the sabbath'. Matthew didn't like that either, so he left that out too; and he also adds various legal reasons why it was ok for Jesus to pick ears of corn on the sabbath. In Matthew, Jesus also tells the disciples to pray that end of the world won't happen on a sabbath, because of course on the sabbath you were forbidden to run. It is Matthew's Jesus who says 'Not one jot or tittle of the law shall pass away'. In Mark

great lumps of the lump have already passed away all over the place.

These differences still have their impact on the church today. One good example is the difference between Mark and Matthew them on the issue of marriage and divorce. In Mark, as in St Paul, the teaching is very tough. Mark's Jesus, like Paul, says marriage is indissoluble. If you divorce and marry someone else, you commit adultery. There is no second marriage.

Matthew however, as a Jewish Christian, found this impossible to accept. Judaism had always allowed divorce and remarriage, from Moses on. The only issue in Judaism was how easily you could get divorced, and that depended on how you interpreted Deuteronomy 5. Moses said a man could divorce his wife if he found some 'indecent' in her. And rabbis endlessly argued what 'indecent' meant. Some said it just meant unsuitability, so basically you could get rid of your wife if she nagged too much or was a rotten cook. Other rabbis said it only meant sexual sin, and adultery was the only reason for divorce. And that is the position that Matthew took too.

So when Matthew read in Mark, "Jesus said 'you can't divorce your wife at all'" he thought 'that can't be right'; and so he put an extra bit in. He added 'except in the case of adultery'. As in all the other cases, Matthew moves Jesus teaching back in the direction of

Judaism. So in Matthew's church, unlike in Mark's or Paul's, a Christian could divorce and marry again, if it was a case of adultery.

The fact that we have two different teachings about this in the Gospels is the reason we have two different views in the Church. The Eastern Orthodox Church has always followed Matthew's Gospel. In the Orthodox Church, you can divorce your spouse for adultery and marry again in church up to three times. The Catholic church on the other hand, followed Mark and Paul, and said marriage was indissoluble under all circumstances. That is why in the Catholic Church, if you want to split up, you have to try and prove that your first marriage was in some sense not really a marriage at all – so it is an annulment, not a divorce.

The Anglican Church, as ever, has tended to hover between the two – for most of the twentieth century we tried to follow the Marcan, indissoluble line, but now we have moved over to the Matthean one. But really it all goes back to that original difference embedded in the Gospels.

3. Some biblical books were written specifically to contradict other books

The books of Ruth and Jonah are good examples of this. They both claim to be ancient books, but they really date from around the fifth century BC, when the Jews were returning from exile in Babylon.

The returning Jews were led by Nehemiah, the military commander, and Ezra the scribe, the religious leader, and the books named after them describe their doings.

Ezra and Nehemiah's policy for rebuilding Judea and Jerusalem was, bluntly, a sort of ethnic cleansing. They made a distinction between the Jews who had been in exile, and those who had stayed in Judea. They found that the Jews who had not gone into exile had often intermarried with gentiles, and also, in their view, were no longer observing the Law properly.

Ezra and Nehemiah reacted to this by tightening up all the laws that marked Jews out from Gentiles, especially circumcision, the sabbath and the purity and marriage laws. Any Jews who had married Gentile wives were ordered to divorce them, and mixed race people were excluded. The result was that many of the Jews or half-Jews who had stayed in Judea were driven North to Samaria, where they became the Samaritans, the despised half-breed Jews that are mentioned especially in Luke's Gospel.

So that's the context. How does this relate to Jonah and Ruth?

Well, you remember the story of Jonah. Jonah is supposed to be a prophet who lived in the eighth century BC, when Israel was overrun by Assyria.

God tells Jonah to go and prophesy against the Assyrians in Nineveh, their capital. Now even in the ancient world the Assyrians had a reputation for barbarity. They were particularly renowned for castrating their enemies. So it is not very surprising that Jonah was reluctant to go, and took a boat in the opposite direction. God however sent storms to stop the boat moving, and when the sailors throw lots to find out whose fault it is, they discovered it's Jonah. Jonah gets thrown into the sea, and is swallowed by the famous whale. After 3 days the whale burps up Jonah on the beach, and surprise surprise, he is in Nineveh, where God told him to go in the first place.

So Jonah finally does what he was told; he preaches to the Assyrians in Nineveh, and tells them that unless they repent of their evil ways God will zap them and completely destroy them and their city.

To Jonah's utter astonishment, the Ninevites listen to him, and they do repent. 'Yes', they said, 'we have been very naughty. Sorry'. And all of them, from the king down, put on sackcloth and ashes and ask the God of Israel for forgiveness. Which he duly grants them.

What happens next is the really significant bit. Because far from being pleased with his success as a prophet, Jonah is extremely peeved. Jonah did not think God should have mercy on these barbarians who had been plaguing and tormenting the Jews for years.

'I knew it!' he says to God. You're hopeless! How can you forgive all these disgusting Gentiles?' And he is so furious he sits in the desert for days on end sulking. God makes a plant grow over him so he gets some shade, but God kills the plant, so Jonah gets even more incandescent, and starts yelling against God and willing himself to die.

The punchline comes at the end. 'Look Jonah' says God. 'You are angry with me for killing a plant. But you wanted me to kill all these people in Nineveh – 600,000 people made in my image, not to mention animals. Why are you so peevish and prejudiced just because I am more compassionate than you are?

And that is it. That is the point of the book – not the bit about the whale, but the fact that Jonah is so narrow minded and thinks he has a monopoly on God, and thinks it is ok to hate Gentiles, and forgets that they too are human beings made in God's image.

What this author is doing is holding up Jonah as a mirror to people like Ezra and Nehemiah, and saying 'Look: this dog-in-the-manger, Gentile-hating Jonah is you! He is reminding them that the Hebrew tradition used to be generous and broad, before Ezra and Nehemiah came along to make it exclusive and narrow by throwing out Gentiles and mixed race Jews.

Jonah is in fact a protest book by a liberal Jew who didn't like what was happening to his religion at the hands of these zealots, and wants to say 'No – God is bigger than you're making him out to be!'

And the same is true of Ruth.

Ruth, you remember is a Gentile, a Moabitess, who finds herself stranded in Israel after her Jewish husband dies young. Her mother-in-law Naomi engineers Ruth into the bed of Boaz, a rich Jewish landowner. Boaz is pleased to see her. She 'warms his feet' as the Hebrew euphemism goes, and pretty soon Ruth ends up as Mrs Boaz. But in this story too the punchline comes at the end, where the author gives us a little genealogy: Boaz and Ruth begat Obed, and Obed begat Jesse and Jesse begat David, who became the king.

The whole point is that Ruth, this Gentile Ruth, was the great-granny of the greatest King Israel ever had. There would never have been a King David but for this Gentile marrying David's grandfather.

So what did Ezra and Nehemiah think they were doing, telling Jewish men they must not marry Gentiles, and if they did, they must divorce them if they wanted to be considered Jews. Were they better than King David?

Once again, the author of Ruth is a liberal Jew protesting against Ezra and Nehemiah, and against the narrowing down of a previously generous religious tradition into something mean and excluding.

And that is a point, I would say, that is highly relevant to the church today. But when people read Ruth or Jonah, hardly anyone realises that that is the point – they only think about the whale or the romantic story.

4. Some books are written pseudonymously to claim the authority of a revered religious figure for changed ideas.

The Pastoral Epistles are a good example of this. These letters purport to be written by St Paul to Timothy and Titus. But they are completely different from Paul's other letters in style and content. They were actually written to combat the Gnostic movement which became a huge threat to the Church in the second century.

One of the dangers of Gnosticism was that many of its teachings were highly compatible with what Paul himself had said, and the biggest Gnostic groups like the Marcionites and the Valentinians claimed that Paul was actually the source of their teaching.

The Gnostics distinguished between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New. They saw the Old Testament Creator God as a sort of sub-god who was at best incompetent and at worst malicious. So Gnostic Christians gave the Old Testament and the Law no authority at all. They also saw creation itself as a mistake. Gnostics were dualists. Only spirit was good because it comes from the real God. Matter is bad, the product of the inferior Creator-God. The word Gnostic comes from the Greek for knowledge, *gnosis*. The Gnostics thought only they knew the real God. For them salvation came from knowing the real God, and had nothing to do with Law or ethics.

Now Paul was not a Gnostic, but a surprising amount of his teaching is compatible with a Gnostic view. Paul also said Jesus came to save us from the curse of the Law. He taught that salvation comes not from obeying rules, but from a relationship with God through faith in Christ. He also draws a sharp contrast between the flesh and the spirit. And like the Gnostics Paul also claimed to have secret knowledge, when he was caught up to the third heaven and learned divine mysteries.

All this made Paul and his letters very dangerous for the second-century church. The Second Letter of St Peter, which is another pseudonymous letter written against the Gnostics, actually says :

‘Beware of our brother Paul, because there are many things in his letters which are hard to understand, which the ignorant twist to their own destruction’.

Paul was a liability who had to be rescued and sanitised, to get him out of the hands of the Gnostics. So the author of the pastorals makes Paul say things which Paul himself would never have said. He warns Timothy against the ‘knowledge (or gnosis) which is falsely so called’. He says the law must still be taught and obeyed. He tells Timothy to avoid new teachings, and the debates about genealogies and mysteries which were typical of Gnosticism. He emphasises the goodness of creation, against the Gnostics who said material things were bad.

The Pastoral Letters also set up a line of authority within the church to distinguish what is heretical and what is not. Timothy and Titus are told to ordain bishops; and then those bishops are to ordain other bishops and presbyters and deacons, so that everyone will know who has proper authority to teach. So here we get the beginnings of the threefold ministry which became the Church’s main line of defence against fragmentation into gnostic sects.

All of which this would have been foreign to Paul, but it is brought into the Pastorals in order to claim Paul’s authority for it.

5. The context is vital for fully understanding the story or text

In order to understand the healing miracles in the Gospels, you need to remember that in Jesus' society there was a very strict code of purity. Certain things were regarded as clean or unclean, kosher or non-kosher. And certain *people* could also be classified as clean or unclean, to differing extents and for different reasons.

You could be unclean because of your race, or if you did certain jobs like being a tax collector. You were unclean if you had almost any kind of handicap: if you were lame, deaf, dumb, blind, or paralysed, or if you had any kind of sore or skin disease or bleeding or paralysis. You were unclean if you were supposedly possessed by demons. You were unclean if you were menstruating, and you were unclean after giving birth - for forty days if you had a boy, and for eighty days if you had a girl. You were unclean if you were a corpse.

The thing about being unclean was that it cut you off from everybody else. It was seen as a literal contagion. If you touched anybody who was unclean, you became unclean yourself. So an unclean person was forbidden to touch anyone else, and to keep themselves hidden away for fear of spreading the contamination.

Not only that, but it cut you off from God as well. According to Leviticus God literally couldn't stand the sight of unclean, defective people. That's why you couldn't enter the Temple if you were lame or blind or paralysed or a woman or a Gentile or a Samaritan. Not only did you have to put up with your disability, God didn't like you either.

Scholars noticed many years ago that if you list the healing miracles, it seems Jesus systematically went around healing all the different kinds of people who according to the Law were non-kosher - a Samaritan, a Gentile, a leper, a deaf man, a blind man, a dumb man, a tax-collector, a woman with a flow of blood, a demoniac, a paralytic, a corpse. He heals at least one in all the categories of unclean people.

And you notice that nearly every time he heals, he *touches* the person. That is, he did exactly what the Law said you mustn't do - because touching them meant you'd become unclean yourself. But Jesus doesn't care. He touches them anyway - because he's come to say: Look; these taboos don't matter any more. All these poor people that God was supposed to hate – actually, the opposite is true, says Jesus. These are in fact the ones God especially loves and cares about. These are the ones to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs.

So the point of these miracles isn't just that Jesus physically healed those individuals 2000 years ago. That's marvellous enough, but that's not the point. The real point is, that he's come to tear down all these taboos and barriers that kept all these people oppressed and marginalized.

Take the example of the story of Jesus healing the woman with a flow of blood, a menstrual problem. The menstrual taboo in Judaism was one of the most powerful. It derived from Genesis 3, which says God cursed Eve with the pain of childbirth for leading Adam into sin. The rabbis argued that menstruation was a reminder of that curse. During her period a woman wasn't meant to leave the house, and if she touched a man she could actually be stoned for defiling him.

The woman in the Gospel story had a continuous flow of blood for twelve years, which meant for twelve years she couldn't leave the house. But now she hears about Jesus, and dares to go out. She pushes through the crowd, scattering her uncleanness all over the place. And finally, she dares to come up touch the cloak of this holy rabbi. Immediately Jesus turns round; he knows something has happened, and says 'Who touched me?' And of course, she is terrified, she has been caught out, she knows she could be killed for this, and she flings herself at his feet and begs for mercy.

Then she hears the incredible, liberating words:
'Woman, your faith has healed you. Go in peace'.

It's a fantastic, dramatic story. But the point is, not just that Jesus healed this one poor woman 2000 years ago. The point that matters is that Jesus is overturning the whole taboo about menstruation that excluded and oppressed women in that society, and which in many societies still does. Like all the miracles, this is revolutionary. Its purpose is to set people free, to include them, give them back their dignity – and in this case of course it's about half the human race.

The trouble is, the Church doesn't always grasp its own gospel. Even today in many churches – Eastern Orthodox churches for example – women are not allowed to receive Communion during their period; and there are African churches too, including Anglican churches, where the same thing applies. But you find it nearer home too. When we were first talking about ordaining women priests, I remember some of my own colleagues saying 'Of course we can't ordain women! What if they touched the altar at the wrong time of the month!' Unbelievable! But that ancient taboo is still around, still doing its dirty work.

Let me give you another example. Luke tells us a story about Jesus healing the servant of a centurion who was 'very dear' to him. Gerd Theissen, a very sober scholar, has pointed out that any Jew reading that story would

immediately have taken it to mean that the centurion and the servant were lovers. It was part of the Jewish fightback against the Greeks and Romans to portray all foreign soldiers as gay, and a lot of the time they were. It was quite common for Roman and Greek officers to take male lovers, often their domestic orderlies, who sometimes became permanent partners. The emperor Hadrian had Antinous, Alexander had Hephaestion, and even Julius Caesar himself was known as the Queen of Bithynia because of a gay affair. (They don't tell you this in Latin GCSE, do they, but I assure you it is true).

That being the case, the fact that Luke chose to include this story should be very significant for gay people today. Because, as I say, these healing miracles are also theological statements about inclusion. Jesus heals and includes categories of people that Leviticus excluded; and one of the categories that Leviticus certainly excluded was homosexuals.

So, if Gerd Theissen is right, and I think he is, the story of the centurion's healing is another story of the same kind: Jesus including the excluded. He's come to embrace all these despised and rejected people that God was supposed to hate, and include them in his kingdom. Even lepers. Even menstruating women. Even gay people.

6. Stories often have multiple levels of meaning – historical, theological and symbolic.

There are several stories in the Gospels about Jesus healing the blind. What can we say about them? Can we suggest to blind people that Jesus will cure them? I don't think many of us would dare. But if we don't, what does it leave us to say? Do we just say Jesus did this 2000 years ago, but now it's not relevant to us?

Once again we have to say that whatever history lies behind these stories, the point of them is a theological truth which is relevant to us all, whether we can physically see or not. What mattered to the Gospel writers wasn't the physical blindness of individuals that Jesus cured, it was the spiritual blindness of us all.

We can prove this from the story of Jesus healing the blind man of Bethsaida in Mark chapter 8. The blind man of Bethsaida comes exactly halfway through the Gospel. If you know Mark, you will know that it is written in two halves. In the first half Jesus gradually reveals who he is. There is a series of tremendous miracles, Jesus cures people and calms a storm and so on, yet the disciples are unbelievably thick and still say

things like 'Ooh – who can this be, that the wind and the sea obey him?...'

But then exactly halfway through the Gospel at Caesarea Philippi the penny drops. 'Who do men say that I am?' asks Jesus. And finally, Peter gets there: 'You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed'. 'Well done' says Jesus. And immediately, now that Peter has got that bit of the truth, Jesus starts to teach him the second bit of the truth – which is, that this Messiah is not going to be a new King David, he is not going to be a warrior King to zap the Romans and send them back to Rome. Instead, he is going to be a humble, suffering Messiah who is to be put to death on the cross. Straightaway you remember Peter objects. 'No Lord, this must never happen to you!'. And Jesus immediately turns round and slaps him down: 'Get behind me Satan: you think as men think, not as God thinks'. And then Jesus spends the second half of the Gospel teaching them the second half of the truth: about the necessity of humility and the cross.

So the point is: Half way through the Gospel Peter gets it half right.

Now, it is no accident that immediately before Peter gets it half right in chapter 8, there is the story of the Blind man of Bethsaida.

What's the connection? What is unique about the story of the blind man of Bethsaida?

Well, it is the only healing miracle that happens in two stages. First Jesus lays his hands on the man and he says 'Erm... I can see people moving but they look like trees walking'. Then Jesus lays his hands the second time, and we are told the man saw plainly, and he was raised up and followed Jesus.

The point is that the two-stage healing of the blind man symbolizes and parallels the two-stage healing of the blindness of Peter and the disciples.

What interests Mark is not so much Jesus' ability to heal the physically blind. This story is actually about Jesus ability to heal the spiritual blindness of us all.

And frankly I think it is irresponsible to preach on that story without pointing that out. Because unless we do, the story doesn't really relate to us. It remains a wonderful story about something that happened long ago. But once we realise the blind man really is us; and once we start to think about how blind we are, and how half the time we only see half the truth, then it becomes very relevant to us all – and maybe God can start opening our eyes too.

7. Some kinds of biblical literature use symbolic systems that are almost unintelligible to modern readers

Have you ever noticed that in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark Jesus does the miracle of the loaves and fishes twice? The only difference is in the number of people, loaves, fishes and baskets of crumbs left over. But these numbers clearly matter because after the second miracle in Mark, Jesus interrogates the disciples about what they have just seen. 'Do you remember', he says, 'how many people got fed the first time?' 'Five thousand'. 'And how many basketfuls of crumbs?' 'Twelve'. 'OK' he says, 'and then the second time we did it - how many people?' 'Four thousand'. 'And how many basketfuls?'. Seven'. 'Right!' says Jesus. 'There you go! See? Geddit?' And the disciples say 'Nope', and immediately Jesus starts laying into them, as he often does in Mark, 'How can you be so thick? Are you Are you blind? How long must I put up with you?'

What the poor disciples and most of us don't grasp is that in Jewish theology there was a whole system of numerical symbolism called gematria. Numbers had different associations.

In the case of the first miracle, the numbers are Jewish. The five and the five thousand are Jewish numbers linked to the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses. The twelve stand for the twelve tribes. In the second

miracle the four and four thousand are Gentile numbers – four stands for the four winds, the corners of the earth, the four Gentile empires that overran Israel. Seven is also the whole world, the completion of creation in seven days, .

The miraculous meal is a foretaste of the kingdom of God, often portrayed in the prophets as a banquet, which Jesus has come to offer mankind. And it is offered first to Jews and then to the Gentiles - because as Paul says, salvation is always first to the Jews and then to the gentiles.

So the two miracles are a kind of prefiguring of that two-stage offer of salvation, to Jews and Gentiles, and the numbers are part of that symbolism.

You get this kind of number symbolism right through the Gospels. There are six water jugs at Cana for the rites of purification, because six was the number of imperfection, that which falls short of 7. Or after the resurrection, when the risen Christ gives the disciples a miraculous catch of fish, we are told there are 153 in their net. Why 153? Because in gematria it is a golden number, the sum of all numbers up to seventeen, symbolising the completion of completion, when the fishers of men will have finished their catch and hauled everyone into heaven.

Just to make things even more mysterious there is a subdivision of gematria called isopsephia. This depends on the fact that Hebrew and Greek letters are also numbers. They didn't have our Arabic numerals, so any Greek or Hebrew word is also a number; and this opens up huge possibilities. I suppose the best-known example is 666, the Number of the Beast in the Book of Revelation. 666 is a bad number anyway because as I said, six is the number of imperfection or sin. But at the same time, by isopsephia, if you write the name 'EMPEROR NERO' in Hebrew letters, that also gives you 666, and it is pretty certain that Nero is the particular beast that the author of Revelation had in mind.

Mind you, that hasn't stopped people speculating for the last 2000 years, trying to prove that the Great Beast is almost anyone – the Pope, Napoleon, Stalin, Hitler - even Tony Blair. I looked on my computer a couple of years ago and discovered a marvellous American website proving the Beast was Barak Obama:

Note (it said) that the Great Beast of Chapter 13 emerges from the sea. Isn't it significant that Obama was born in Honolulu in the midst of the Pacific. Honolulu has a latitude of 216 degrees, and since $216 = 6 \times 6 \times 6$ this is obviously the number of the Beast. Furthermore the name "Barak" adds up to 36, and if you add up all the

digits from 1 to 36, the result again is "666".

Finally, the letters of the name Obama are all in the word Abomination. Brothers and sisters, the end is upon us!

The problem with apocalyptic is that the symbolism is so open-ended, you can make it fit almost any world events of any period, and then persuade yourself the end is nigh. And sometimes that's funny, but it's also dangerous. Don't forget the Jim Jones massacre, the Waco disaster, the mass suicide of the Solar Temple cult. All those groups were created and controlled by leaders using apocalyptic texts to convince them the end had come. And even when they are not so obviously deadly, there are plenty of other sects too who abuse apocalyptic to frighten people into conversion.

That's why it is so important to understand not only about apocalyptic, but about the whole point and process of real biblical study. Religion is powerful stuff, but it is very easily manipulated by the bad and the mad, and very easily changed into something oppressive and inhuman. Which is why all this stuff I have just been banging on about needs to be far more widely known.

That's it. Thank you.