

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH 10th SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY WEEK 20 YEAR A 20
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My heart sinks when I hear church leaders talk about ‘biblical Christianity’. That’s because they usually mean Christianity according to their own way of understanding the bible. They regard the bible as an ‘enquire within about anything’ book. Somewhere they’ll find a verse which answers their question – or, more likely, supports the view they’ve already taken.

For Anglicans, and perhaps for most Christians, scripture is one of the sources to which we look if we are trying to find a Christian view on a particular issue. A second source is the tradition of the Church – the conclusions that other Christians before us have come to. The creeds come under this heading. We’ll be saying one of the creeds in a few minutes: ‘We believe in one God...’. That statement of Christian belief was agreed by a council of Bishops meeting in the 4th century. It was a common statement: we believe, rather than I believe, though some of us may have grown up knowing the ‘I believe’ version. A third source which helps us come to a Christian view is human reason: our God-given ability to think and try to make sense of things, come to a reasonable view, make the right decisions.

These three sources – scripture, tradition and reason – relate to each other in various ways. Linking them all is the idea of community, or communities. The bible didn’t fall ready-made out of heaven. It’s a collection of books which a Jewish community and then a Christian community recognised as bearing faithful witness to their experience of God. Then scripture played its part in forming the communities as people read the bible and proclaimed it in worship. The tradition was developing, and naturally Christians used their reason in applying scripture and tradition to the communities in which they lived.

All this means that understanding the bible is not as straightforward as finding a verse and regarding that as the last word on the subject. Indeed, if we try to take scripture literally, we run into problems. Today’s gospel is a good example. A Gentile woman approaches Jesus, who’s trying to have a rest, and asks him to cure her daughter. At first he declines to do so, but she persists, and eventually Jesus does as she asks. We probably feel uncomfortable with the picture of Jesus this incident provides: why is he unwilling to help someone who obviously has faith, and why does he refer to the Gentiles as dogs? This incident is described in Matthew’s gospel and Mark’s gospel. But the details are different. In one of them the woman is Canaanite, in the other she is Greek. In one of them she comes in shouting. In one of them the disciples urge Jesus to send her away. In

one of them Jesus says he's come only for the lost sheep of the house of Israel. So we're presented with a disturbing picture of Jesus and gospel accounts with substantial differences.

At this point you may be tempted to give up: you want a simple faith, and you often find the bible difficult to understand. So do I – but the attempt to understand is exciting, and helps us to apply our faith to our life in today's world. Think of the communities involved in the gospels as we have them. There's Jesus and the disciples, moving mainly amongst fellow Israelites, but occasionally encountering Gentiles; was the good news of the kingdom for them as well? There are the Pharisees, teachers of the traditional Jewish faith. In both Matthew and Mark the passage immediately before the Gentile woman contains Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees for teaching that detailed rituals had to be observed in all walks of life. He says that God's law gets obscured in all the detail, and calls the Pharisees 'blind guides'. If we feel that Jesus is being harsh to a Gentile woman, he's been pretty hard on some of his own people. Then there are the communities for whom Matthew and Mark wrote their gospels: churches meeting in people's houses in a few countries around the Mediterranean. To begin with their members were mainly Jewish. Was the gospel also for Gentiles? Were there any incidents in Jesus' life which might provide some guidance – initial reservations but eventual action?

Now for the dogs. This is where it gets interesting – or I think so, anyway. There's a traditional Jewish way of teaching. A Rabbi (which means teacher) would take a passage or detail from the Old Testament and retell it to make a particular point. But – and this is important – it was often a very 'creative' retelling with lots of lateral thinking. The retelling might be quite different from the original. Our Old Testament reading today came from the 56th chapter of the prophet Isaiah – with the affirmative message that foreigners who join themselves to the LORD would be welcomed amongst his people. Later in that chapter Isaiah has harsh words for any false prophets and teachers in Israel, whom he calls blind watchmen (remember Jesus called the Pharisees 'blind guides').

Isaiah also calls them dogs. I quote:

Israel's watchmen are blind, they are all without knowledge; they are all dumb dogs, they cannot bark; dreaming, lying down, loving to slumber. The dogs have a mighty appetite; they never have enough.

So in this bit of Isaiah, in a context of Gentiles being accepted as God's people, there are hungry dogs lying down. Think of the dogs under the table eating the crumbs that fall, in the woman's conversation with Jesus. My feeling is that Matthew and Mark, in describing Jesus' encounter with the woman, have used creatively this image of dogs from a scripture they knew. It was relevant to

the question posed by Jesus' ministry and present in the life of the early church: who are God's people? Is it those who take it for granted they are the chosen ones, or the outsiders showing faith?

History is full of groups who regard themselves as superior, often defining themselves against others who are different. Recent events show they are still with us. Race is not the only defining feature. Sometimes such groups look for justification to scripture, Christian or other. I suggest that when we pay scripture the attention it deserves, as the record of humanity's response to God's purposes, we find the message that his love is wider than the distinctions some are all too ready to make. That is biblical Christianity.