

Ludlow 29 October 2017.

Just before Christmas, last year, I was on the train from Hayes and Harlington to Paddington – very crowded and just one seat available, next to a lady. She beckoned me to sit next to her. Poor thing was having a nosebleed, so I sympathised with that for a bit. I was in mufti, I should say. Then she suddenly asked ‘Are you a Christian?’ ‘Well’, I answered, ‘as it happens, I am’. We chatted but – I don’t know – somewhere between Southall and Hanwell it became clear that we really weren’t singing from the same hymn sheet. Tell you the truth I was a bit relieved when she got out at Ealing Broadway – but not before she’d found out who I was and where I came from. Didn’t think any more about it but, a few days later, received an e-mail via the cathedral website.

Dear Dean

I did enjoy our conversation when we sat beside each other on the train to Paddington last Wednesday. I hope the rest of your journey back to Hereford wasn’t too tedious.

I found it intriguing that two people who call themselves Christians could hold view so opposed to each other. For example, whereas you don’t take the Bible too seriously and describe yourself as an ‘arch liberal’, I believe the Bible is the inerrant word of God!

I told you that I believe we are seeing End Time Bible prophecy being fulfilled before our eyes and also that Pope Francis is the False Prophet of Revelation 13. I would like to add that I believe America is Mystery Babylon of Revelation 18, whose plagues come in a single day.

If I am correct and we see Pope Francis soon become head of a ‘United Religions’ and America’s sudden and dramatic collapse, I hope you will recall our conversation and this e-mail. Who knows, it might lead you to revise your opinion of the bible and take it seriously!

I hope you have a very happy – and not too tiring - Christmas.

My reply. Dear Mrs.....How very kind of you to write.

I think I should clarify one or two things.

First, I hold the Bible in great honour, read it daily and hope I am guided by its precepts. However, a liberal interpretation of Scripture has been part of the landscape since the first half of the 19th century – it is nothing new, and has been embraced by godly Christians through the generations – I believe it to be an honourable and Christ-like approach. But I also understand that there can be a literalist approach too. I don’t hold with that approach, any more that you with a more liberal interpretation, but I hope I have learned to respect that approach. I do however, not agree with your assertion that I don’t take the Bible seriously – I may not in the way you understand it, but take it seriously I most certainly do.

Part of the challenge placed before us by Archbishop Justin is how we can ‘disagree well’ – I think this vital in a world where Christians, of all persuasions, need to set aside doctrinal differences in the cause of justice and peace and care for the poor. I think that this is the approach that Pope Francis is taking and I sense it is a Christ-like approach.

I wish you and your family a blessed Christmas and I hope that your nosebleed has been healed...

Now we may smile, but believe me, I tell this not to mock or belittle, but because it says important things. Mind you, I have to say that if seeing the USA as Mystery Babylon in Revelation 18 – even under Trump - and His Holiness as whatever in Revelation 13 isn’t personal interpretation of Scripture, I’ll eat my homburg – but let that pass.

It’s something to do with idols, isn’t it? What did William Cowper write in the hymn?

The dearest idol I have known
What e’er that idol be
Help me to tear it from thy throne

And worship only thee.

Idols aren't just blocks of wood or stone – they're anything we set up which can distract us from what and who God really is. We can see the grossest idols in our world today – so-called religion being made a grotesque parody by so-called ISIS. There's a wicked idol if ever there was one. But there are other, more subtle ones. So yes, we can even set up the Bible as an idol and interpret it in such a way as it becomes a tyrant – infallible – flying in the face of reason and common sense.

And yes, we can set up liberalism – even arch-liberalism – as an idol – to be protected against all the odds, even to the extent of becoming, ironically, 'illiberal'.

This morning's readings speak of the vital importance of Scripture – its enduring quality - the gospel - Heaven and Earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

In Nehemiah – words of Scripture that bring comfort

In the Epistle – words which enrich us and lead us to a life of greater charity.

What we don't find in any of those readings is a sense of the infallibility of Scripture. In this, of course, the good old C of E has a gift to make to the whole church – when there's something that needs a view or is challenging or controversial, what do we do? Just trot out what the Bible says? The C of E says 'no' – instead, use the three-pronged approach – Scripture, Tradition and Reason – measure it up against all three.

Yes, Scripture – what does the Bible say – ponder it – weight it up.

Then Tradition – how has this been modified in the light of subsequent and cultural developments?

Then Reason – when we look at what the Bible says, and Tradition – we ask ourselves – what does our living brain say to us – we are reasonable human beings – we're not bound by idols – so what does our common sense say to us?

So, we offer that three-pronged approach as a real gift, to break down barriers of intolerance, literalism and rigidity. And we offer this technique, surely in a spirit of love.

So you see, perhaps the lady on the train to Paddington and I were singing from the same sheet. We were, and are, both, in need of repentance for judging each other – we all do that. She and I – indeed all of us are united because we need to practice that daily repentance that leads us away from anything that obscures the God of love. Yes, all of us, however we interpret our religion, need to avoid making idols, at all cost and to be united in those practical marks of love that change the world.

A cartoon shows a sceptic, shouting up the heavens, 'God! If you're up there, tell us what we should do!'

Back comes a voice: 'Feed the hungry, house the homeless, establish justice'.

The sceptic looks alarmed. 'Just testing', he says.

'Me too?', replies the voice.