

The Word of the Lord

'This is the Word of the Lord', we said just now after our Old Testament and New Testament readings. The question is, what do we mean when we say that? The former Dean of St Alban's told a story in a lecture he gave in my last parish about a lady in his church in London reading from St Paul about women having to wear hats in church, and afterwards saying, 'This is not the Word of the Lord; it is St Paul being silly.' She may or may not have been entitled to that judgment, but she *was* entitled to pose the question. After all, if instead of the part of Psalm 19 we heard this morning we had had words from Psalm 137:

O daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy the one who repays you
for all you have done to us; Who takes your little ones, and dashes them against the rock.

Would we feel comfortable saying 'This is the Word of the Lord'? I think not. It is a travesty of giving the Bible the honoured place it rightly has in Christian thinking to trivialize it into saying you can open it at any point, read words totally out of context and assert that this is the Word of the Lord. Our ancestors did that to justify the practice of slavery, The Dutch Reformed Church did it to justify Apartheid. There are fundamentalist Christians who use it to justify beating their children. It just won't do to think like that.

There are lots of words in the Bible - depending on the translation you are using, it is about 74,000 in total. Obviously lots of them are used many times- so there are about 14,000 different words, put together in all sorts of ways. If we worked on things like frequency of use, there would be lots of interesting things to note. In the New International Version, one of the two which are most commonly used in churches, and the one I have managed to get figures for, the word Jesus occurs 1275 times, but Hell only 14. There were times in the past when from the way preachers behaved, you might have imagined that the count was the other way round.

What we have to be very careful about is that we don't give the words that are in the Bible some kind of magic status which they shouldn't have. We talk about the word (singular) of the Lord, not the words of the Lord. The Word of the Lord ultimately is Jesus, but we believe that the words which have been written and accepted as authoritative firstly by the Jewish community, and then later by the Christian community have a unique place in helping us to encounter God. But we have to read them with our minds engaged, and we need to read them with help. The Presbyterian 'Westminster Confession' which had much the same status as the 39 Articles of Religion have for Anglicans said: All things in scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear to all: yet those things which are necessary to be

known, believed and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place in scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain to a sufficient understanding of them.' Would that were true! - but it takes only a moment's reflection to see that for the best part of 500 years, different branches of the Christian church, equally loyal and devoted followers of Jesus, have appealed to the same words, and found in them support for very different beliefs and practices.

For a start we have to agree on what words mean. That isn't always easy. I wonder if you know that bit from Alice in Wonderland where she argues with Humpty Dumpty?

"There's glory for you!"

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory,'" Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously, "Of course you don't - till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knockdown argument for you!'"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knockdown argument,'" Alice objected.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it mean - neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master - that's all."

Those who have thought about these things reckon there are at least three 'meanings' of a word. For a start there is what can be called the '**public**' meaning. That includes that the definition of a word means in the dictionary - in other words what we, the public, have agreed it shall mean. Even there, there can be a problem, because many words have more than one meaning. Let me give you a Biblical example. The word 'cosmos' - a Greek word we now use in English, occurs quite a lot in the New Testament. But unfortunately it can mean five different things. Sometimes it means the whole of creation, more often it is the world of mankind. Sometimes it means everyone, and yet again sometimes it means this present life, or yet again the existing world order, past or present. Do you see the complexity of the problem for a translator? That is the variety of possible meanings in the original Greek. Then you have the problem of whether you have exactly the same equivalents in the language into which you are translating. Let me give you an example of that. The French 'esprit' and the German 'geist' both overlap quite a lot with the meanings of the English word 'spirit', but neither of them, unlike 'spirit' in English can be used to refer to alcohol. And none of the three exactly corresponds to the Biblical words ruach and pneuma in Hebrew and Greek, which both carry the possible meanings of 'spirit' 'breath; and 'wind.'

We run the risk of reading back into what they say images from our own culture which are very different. At weddings we refer to Jesus being at a wedding in Cana. He didn't go to a wedding service, because they didn't have them. He went to a party. It isn't even just a question of definitions, but also the

feelings they engender. So if I used the word 'home' it will have a much warmer feel to it is I am referring to the place where you live, than if I use it in the expression 'The Home Office.'

Then there is what might be called the '**user's** meaning'. Every time we use a word, we do so in a particular context, which we know, because we are in it. We may also know how our hearers will know and use that word. So for example people in my former parish of Chobham could use the expression 'web-footed' and it had a totally different local meaning which is inexplicable to someone who doesn't know the local culture. Near my Vicarage in Manchester fifty years ago they opened a new pub called 'The Pig on the Wall'. I would be extremely surprised if anyone here had the slightest idea why, and what its local significance was. You will have to ask me afterwards if you want to know!

The user also will have a tone of voice, or a facial expression which enables the words to be understood in a particular way. Allied to that is the question of the user's intention. Words can be misunderstood if they are meant as a joke, but taken seriously, or taken literally when they are meant in a different way. Telling someone to get lost does not imply they need to find an impenetrable wood or a confusing set of roads! When Jesus tells his disciples, when he sends them out, 'not to greet anyone on the road' what on earth did he mean? Should Christians going about some pious work avoid human contact? Literalists might say so, but they would be making nonsense of it. Jesus talked in the context of a society in which greeting people had long and involved formulae which politeness dictated should happen. So to get involved in that would mean you couldn't get what you wanted to do done. We are totally misunderstanding it if we think it has something to do with not saying 'Morning!' as we pass someone on our way to church.

You might also want to add that there is a '**hearer's** meaning'. For every one of us, some words have a personal resonance because of things that have happened to us. Mentioning a place where we have been, maybe where something significant happened, will colour what we hear. People say 'sticks and stones can hurt my bones but words can never hurt me' - but that is nonsense. So a words which have hurt us in the past will still have a negative feel when we hear them again, whatever the context.

But that is only the beginning of the issues. What for example in the Old Testament are the 'teraphim' which according to Gen 31 are small enough for Rachel to put in her camel bag, but according to I Samuel 19 are big enough to give the illusion of a man asleep in bed? No-one knows. Maybe one day we will find some evidence from other writing which can make the mystery clear.

Where does all this leave us? It could stifle us and make us think 'It's all too difficult'. But that is crazy. There will be difficulties, and mysteries as we try to read words written by people who lived in a very different world from ours. But reading the Bible has rightly been a source of spiritual comfort and inspiration, of challenge and support for countless Christians. I have spent an extraordinary amount of time over the years persuading people to read the Bible, and helping them to do so sensibly. That has, I hope, been time well spent, and given the opportunity I shall go on doing it. But we get the most from

the Bible by being *open* to it, not by pre-judging what we should get from it. Getting steamed up about the nature of its inspiration or authority is a sideline. The great theologian Karl Barth, who spent a lifetime studying the Bible, was asked by a lady whether he thought the serpent in the Garden of Eden actually spoke. His reply was 'Madam, it doesn't matter whether the serpent actually spoke. What matters is what the serpent said'. And that is the point - we need to know the stories, and to read the words with brains engaged, and conscious that we need to work at some things to make sense of them. Speaking for myself, I need a lot of help to make sense of it, because there are lots of things which need explanations. We can't open the Bible and expect an instant answer to anything - because if we find answers at all, we may find contradictory ones, because the Bible reveals the growing revelation of God, recorded over centuries. As the former Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright, put in one of his many books - the Bible isn't a technical manual of how the world is, like a description of a car. Rather it is a mechanic who helps you to fix it, a garage attendant who refuels it, and a guide who tells you how to use it to get to where you want to go. In other words, it is a dynamic thing - something which is not dead letters, cold words on a page, but something with potential. That is what we heard in the Old Testament reading: 'So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.' But the word is God's, and that can't be restricted to words on a page. What those written words can do is to help us to see that living Word, the Word of the Lord who is Jesus.