Being Biblical People

When I was in Manchester, we had in our area a Pentecostal Church which proclaimed to the world in huge letters over the building 'Droylsden's Bible Church'. I am sure that was a fair description. What continually annoyed me was the implication that the rest of us were *not* biblical. I doubt there is a church in Christendom which has more of the Bible than we do in our services, because not only do we normally hear three readings from it, but most of our liturgy is grounded in it and quotes from it. We now have the option to make this last Sunday after Trinity 'Bible Sunday'. And it is probably a good thing to focus on something we perhaps take for granted in various ways. I thought it might be fun for each of us to do a Readers Digest-type quiz to see how 'biblical' we are. The results are entirely private!

The answers are at the end.

1. How many books in the Bible?
2. Who wrote the letter to the Hebrews
3. How many letters of St John are there?
4. How many of the gospels tell the story of the shepherds at Bethlehem?
5. What was the new name God gave to Jacob after a wrestling match?
6. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek. But there is another language used very occasionally in both. What is it?
7. How many so-called 'comforters' did Job have?
8. There are two religious 'parties' mentioned in the New Testament. One is the Pharisees, What is the name of the other?
9. Mary was the mother of Jesus. What was Mary's mother's name?
10. In which book do we read the earliest account of the Last Supper?

And a bonus question

11. Why might the Bible be an encouragement to people who use canals?

What I would hope is that we can all go on learning to be properly biblical. I want to suggest two things that *doesn't* mean, and three that it does, and then suggest three ways of helping achieve it.

I don't think being biblical is being a verse-quoter. That comes from an almost superstitious view that verses from the Bible, totally out of context, have some kind of authority in themselves. Treating them that way undermines the real authority the Bible has, and must have as one of our sources of God's truth. If you want a wonderful example of this, if you are in Suffolk, visit the beautiful church at Helmingham.

You will find there very large red graffiti on the inside walls. There are all sorts of Biblical references - - John 4.20, Eph. 3.6 or whatever. They are the record of a disagreement between the incumbent of the time - who was later the first Bishop of Liverpool - John Charles Ryle, and the then Lady Tollemache, who lived in the adjoining stately home. They bandied texts about whatever it was they were arguing about. It did neither of them any good, and stands as an awful warning not to be like them. It is biblical vandalism.

Nor should we be literalists. Taking the Bible literally has caused more heresy than any other single cause. You can prove almost any kind of doctrine if you take things out of context or read them in a way that was not intended. We need to distinguish poetry from prose, story from history, fictional character from historical personage. Otherwise we are in danger of being like people who believe there really was someone called Jane Eyre, or that the telephone directory is a very boring story.

What we must we, to be biblical people, is to reflect the kind of faith the bible hands on to us. Let me just put three words in front of you. The first is **developing**. The Bible records the changing and developing understanding of God as he revealed himself to us in his covenant with the people of Israel, and supremely in the coming of Jesus. So the Bible is self-contradictory, if you want to look at it like that, because it has not been edited in the way that a modern book might be. New editions of a book about history or science will change the things that have been superseded by new information and discoveries. The Bible records the awful way people used to think, and how they came to refine and develop their belief. And that is how we ought to be. As we acquire information and experience of God, our faith should be developing and growing and refining. It should be a faith like the ones the Bible reveals - a faith on the move. Jesus shocked people by suggesting that what they *thought* they understood about a passage from Isaiah wasn't actually the whole truth. They had to grow in their perceptions.

Secondly, being biblical people means **struggling**. The Bible records not only the changes, but the struggles people had to work out what faith in God meant for ordinary life. It records it in all sorts of ways - in stories, and laws, and in real grappling with mysteries. Abraham struggled to cope with a God who unsettled him from his home. The Israelites struggled with what it meant to follow God as slaves in Egypt, as settlers in a Promised Land, as exiles in Babylon. Paul wrestled with what the implications of following Jesus were for people living in pagan and sometimes oppressive society, for Jews who thought of themselves as exclusively God's people. It is not a compendium of answers, but a record of dealing with questions. And they could get help with today's questions by looking at how people had resolved yesterday's. That is what Paul was getting at in the New Testament reading from Romans - 'whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction'. They couldn't look up the answer, but they could get help on the principles. Now that is how we have to be. Dealing with today's questions can't be resolved by quoting the past. I remember Bishop David Jenkins talking about an ecumenical meeting at which the Greek Orthodox delegates were asked for their views on nuclear disarmament. They went into

what he called ‘a garlic-filled huddle’, and came out with the conclusion that they didn’t have an opinion because the Fathers had not written anything about nuclear disarmament! We can’t get an indexed Bible and look up a pat answer on anything. We have to be so familiar with it that we can think *new* thinking which is biblical because it is rooted not in selective quotation, but in being in tune with biblical thought.

Thirdly, being biblical people means being **trusting**. The Bible records what happens when people live lives of faith. It is about the unchanging nature of God in a changing world. It is about the light of God in a dark world, the truth of God in an uncertain world. As we heard in Isaiah this morning ‘I am God, and there is no other.’ So by becoming more and more aware of what is in the biblical record, we can share with writers from a very different world than ours a sense of what living by trust in God meant for them, and can mean for us. We enter into this great inheritance of stories, which can inform, enlighten, and as Paul said in the New Testament reading ‘encourage’ us.

So, if we are to share a biblical faith which is developing, struggling and trusting, how can we do it? There is no way other than reading it, or listening to it read. Some of you read the Bible for yourselves every day. Some read it regularly, but not that regularly. Some read it occasionally. Some regularly hear it read in church, but don’t read it at home. We all have to make the decisions about what helps us. But the bottom line is that the more we read, the more we are likely to be the developing, struggling and trusting people we ought to be if we are on the pilgrimage of faith.

Let me suggest three ways of doing this, which you might like to consider. Let me take the image of planning a holiday. You can, for example, just **wander about**. And that will mean you light on unexpected delights, but on the other hand you might miss some important things. There are lots of people who do that with the Bible - they dip in, here and there. And that may be a way of discovering unexpected delights indeed. So by all means take that kind of biblical trip. On the other hand, some people prefer a **package tour**. That means the itinerary is set out for you, and you are assured of seeing things that are not to be missed. The biblical equivalent of that are the wealth of helps that are available in the form of daily or weekly bible-reading notes, which open up the text, and give a course to follow. Or lastly, people can opt in to a **guided tour**. That means having others alongside you, and someone to show you things and explain things.

If you ask people to imagine a Bible, they often think of a little black book. Sadly, it is often also like the work of Chairman Mao a little re(a)d book. What we should be aiming for is to make it a little blue book - because like the parliamentary reports from which that expression comes, it contains a wealth of information and ideas for us to digest and use. May God bless our use of it, together, and as individuals.

And here are those quiz questions, with the answers.

How many books in the Bible? **(39 + 27 - count the letters in Old / New Testament)**

Who wrote the letter to the Hebrews **Your guess is as good as mine – nobody knows**
How many letters of St John are there? **3**
How many of the gospels tell the story of the shepherds at Bethlehem? **1 - (Luke)**
What was the new name God gave to Jacob after a wrestling match? **Israel**
The Old Testament was written in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek. But there is another language used very occasionally in both. What is it? **Aramaic**
How many so-called 'comforters' did Job have? **3 (Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar)**
There are two religious 'parties' mentioned in the New Testament. One is the Pharisees, What is the name of the other? **Sadducees**
Mary was the mother of Jesus. What was Mary's mother's name? **Anne (Holy Annie, God's granny) - mind you, that isn't in the Bible, but the Proto-Gospel of James - trick question!**
In which book do we read the earliest account of the Last Supper? **1 Corinthians**
Why might the Bible be an encouragement to people who use canals? **Happy are you, Simon Barge-Owner – Matthew16.17, sort of!**