

Now, there's nothing I like more than a sermon that starts with a few statistics to whet your appetites for my subject so let's dive in. 59% of British School children surveyed do not know that the story of Jonah and the Whale is from the bible. Perhaps slightly more alarmingly, 29% of the same respondents didn't know that the nativity story was biblical. Even better, 27% of the same children's parents thought that the story of superman can be found in the bible. In a separate survey of Church ministers in this country, 76% admit to using the bible regularly as the subject for their sermons (which of course begs the question: "what on earth are the other 24% talking about) although only 68% of congregations believe the bible is taught regularly in their churches. Which demonstrates that around 10% of ministers believe they are teaching the bible but that's not what their congregations think they're hearing. Fingers crossed that I don't join the 10% club today.....

Today is Bible Sunday. A day when we come together as a Church to celebrate this book and its influence in our

lives and to recognise its importance in a world where the men and women outside the church - regardless of their level of education - are becoming less and less familiar with its contents. We can laugh at a situation where over a quarter of adults think that superman is biblical, but it in fact demonstrates a serious problem that is only going to get worse if we allow it to. And this is, if I may, what I want to talk about today.

So let's start at the very beginning. What is this book? Well, more accurately it is a collection of 66 books. The Bible contains history, poetry, humor, prophecy, romance, letters, biographies, songs, journals, advice, laws and stories. In other words the Bible is a library of different kinds of literature. This literature was written by more than 40 different authors in three different languages over a period of around 1,500 years. The 39 books of the old testament were written over a period of 1100 years between 1500BC and 400BC - to put that in context, 1100 years ago from today would take us comfortably back into Anglo Saxon times. The Old Testament was primarily

written in Hebrew (with a little Aramaic (the language that Jesus spoke, and still the language used by our persecuted Christian brothers and sisters in Syria.) The books that make up the Old Testament are the same texts as those used in the Jewish religion, although they are in a different order. I have to say that that fact alone absolutely amazed a Jewish friend of mine who had no idea that we Christians use the Psalms, and Genesis, and Isaiah and Micah and the rest as part of our bible.

The 27 Books of the New Testament were probably written over a span of around 50 years and were written exclusively in Greek during the first and probably the second century AD - around five hundred years later than the last Old Testament book. The Greek language was probably for practical purposes - although Jesus and his followers probably spoke Aramaic, and would have understood Hebrew, Greek had by then become the accepted language of academia, business and was understood across the classical world. If you want to spread your message far and wide from C1st Palestine,

you write your material in Greek in other words. Greek was then what English is becoming now - the global language. The earliest books of the New Testament were the epistles, with 1 Thessalonians dated at around 50AD. The Gospels are later - with Mark probably being the first - and almost certainly influencing Matthew and Luke, who completed his account last - sometime between 75 and 150AD.

OK - enough of the biblical studies lecture. Our starting point that comes out of all of this is a challenge. How do we take this disparate group of books and somehow coalesce it - to recognise that the bible is perfect and that "all scripture" is indeed "breathed out by God" is we learned in our reading from 2 Timothy today? Well the answer to this is "it's complicated" but I think it is worth spending just a few minutes thinking about how this can possibly be.

So What does God-breathed mean? The word in the original Greek Theopneustos is only used in this verse - it

appears nowhere else in the bible and only appears rarely in other Greek literature... and is very difficult to translate. What this says is that Paul was being specific - this isn't a throw-away word. He chose it deliberately. Many versions of the bible have translated it as "inspired" but I don't think that quite cuts it - inspired means "breathed into" - as if God in some way took scripture that was already there and sprinkled it with some sort of spiritual fairy dust. By using Theopneustos Paul is saying here is that every single word of scripture reflects the very essence of God. It implies that every word of scripture is perfect. It implies that every book of the bible (yes including Leviticus) is there because God wants it to be there. And it is worth pointing out that when Paul was writing this to Timothy the New Testament was still in its formation - it effectively didn't exist as a body of scripture - so when Paul is referring to scripture in the passage he is referring to the Hebrew scriptures - to the Old Testament.

So here we have another dilemma - Paul saying to Timothy that all scripture is God breathed and yet we

contrast this with Jesus' own rebuke that we heard in today's Gospel reading. "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life". The implication in Jesus' comment here is that his audience are wrong to do this - the Scriptures in themselves don't lead to eternal life. But they do lead the reader to Jesus.... "and it is they (the scriptures) that bear witness to me" as Jesus says in our reading. Martin Luther, once said: "The Bible is the cradle wherein the Christ child is laid." By this he meant that every word of Scripture heralds, anticipates, forms our understanding of Christ. As the cradle of something or someone who was entirely perfect, it follows that Scripture is perfect too. Yes Leviticus. Yes Ezekiel. All of it. But as Jesus points out, the bible isn't in of itself the key to eternal life. The bible is essential because it reveals the key to eternal life that is Jesus Christ himself. Scripture is perfect because it points the listener or reader to that which is absolutely and incomprehensibly perfect - Jesus.

“But hang on a minute” I hear you cry (inwardly thank goodness!).... How can scripture possibly be perfect? Isn't it inconsistent? Are we really supposed to believe the accounts of creation in Genesis for example given our understanding of evolution, Geology and astrophysics? And how can an unchangeable, all loving, gentle, kind God encourage some of the more extreme behaviours that we witness in the Old Testament? These are really important questions, and I think they get to the heart of why some people who are Christians shy away from the bible - it appears to contain too many contradictions, too many apparent flaws. Best keep in on the shelf where it won't cause any damage. Best box it into church on Sundays and not let it run riot during the week. Certainly don't introduce any of my liberal post-enlightenment friends to it because it doesn't really stack up to any kind of scrutiny. Ring any bells? 42% of Americans believe the bible to be the literal word of God and yet 51% of Americans in the same survey feel the bible is too difficult for them to understand and they don't read it. Therein hangs the dilemma.

Well I think that the problem comes not with scripture itself, but in how we, as mere mortals, choose to interpret God's word. Although we are clearly called in the Timothy reading to use scripture proactively "for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness" And yet we cannot and should not begin to try and understand the mind of God. There's a tension here isn't there?... "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." as we heard in our Isaiah passage today. "Don't be arrogant enough to try and understand me " says God "for what I do, and how I do it are different." And this applies to scripture. The point is that the lack of perfection we perceive comes in our fallibility not God's. Our inability to fathom the mind of God. An inability to see anything but the smallest speck of God's plan for his creation and his creatures.

This has big ramifications. If we don't take this point on board, we can use scripture in our own steam to justify almost anything. I spent two years in Wandsworth prison (as a visitor running an Alpha course in case you thought otherwise!). It might come as a surprise to you to hear that prisons are often quite spiritual places and not usually in a good way. In prison you can encounter any number of self-styled preachers who can twist scripture, and take it out of context in order to justify the most bizarre theologies imaginable. These guys walk around with a bible in their hands, spouting theologies regarding Prosperity gospels, hate crimes, gang warfare, tattoos, murder... you name it and they use random pieces of scripture to give their views credibility. And it doesn't stop in prison.... Scripture famously was used to justify slavery, discrimination against women, and more recently apartheid in mainstream church congregations.

These are all extreme examples to make a point. Actually, we are all vulnerable to misusing scripture to justify our own points of view. Points of view that don't necessarily

reflect the heart or mind of God. Sometimes even points of view that justify my own less than perfect behaviour. Jesus taught us that the two greatest commandments above all others were first to love him with all our hearts and all our minds and second to love one another. In practical terms it is possible to use scripture as a means to judge other people that shows anything but love for our neighbour. And that's human nature isn't it? But it is misusing scripture.

And the point is, that if we use scripture properly, to meditate on it, to use it as a guide on our lifelong journey that draws us ever closer to the mind of God it has extraordinary power. The power not to judge other people but the power to speak to ourselves - to my life, to my lifestyle, to my choices. The power to encourage us, and the power in our hands to encourage others. Power to point out to me where I am going wrong. Power to give us hope in the midst of despair.

And most importantly, it has the power to change the lives of others. A whole generation of people growing up without knowing anything about the bible or its contents, with a suspicion of faith generally and even a hostility towards it, and views about the Church and christianity that have been shaped by a media who are at best uninformed and at worst have a clear agenda to eradicate “religion” from this country. But if these people have no exposure to the bible, no reason to pick it up and read it - no conception of where to start on this journey they will never understand the Good news contained within it. And we can no longer rely on schools to give our children the basics - as you know, Christianity is now taught as part of a much wider religious studies agenda - and I know for a fact (mainly because I spend most Sundays “helping” George with his RE homework) that as much time (if not more) is spent learning about Hindu monkey Gods, and the Qu-raan than is taught about the fundamental beliefs of Christianity and the contents of the bible. And if George didn’t come to Church (yes, kicking and screaming like

most 10 year old boys) he genuinely wouldn't have a clue about what this book contains.

And in all this we have a responsibility don't we? There is nobody better placed to encourage our friends, our families, our colleagues to pick up the bible than us. The generation of people who honestly believe that Superman is a bible character aren't likely to set foot inside a church anytime soon. No we need to meet these people where they are and we need to personalise the bible to them. Not the big picture stuff, not to talk about "the Christian view" of this and that burning issue, but to tell the people we know and love how the bible speaks to me, how I struggle with it sometimes, how it can in the same chapter appear harsh and uncompromising and yet speak to me personally, of my redemption and a love for me displayed by an omnipotent God that I can't begin to explain. That tells of the wonder of this extraordinary work of literature that is breathed out from God himself, and provides an extraordinary bridge between this mere human and the divine.

