

CONVERSATIONS WITH THE BIBLE

It's Bible Sunday. I wonder if that sets the pulse racing? Probably not. You'll have been to lots of Bible Sundays but I wonder if any of them have got you reading the Bible any more than usual? May I suggest again – probably not? We all know what a 'Good Thing' it is to read the Bible, our core text as Christians, but we don't actually do it very much, if we're honest.

And that can be for any number of reasons: the gap in our faith between Sunday and Monday, the complexity of the Bible, the fact that some of it is really boring (think Leviticus), the fact that in a busy life we choose our activities on the basis of what gives us obvious benefit – and we can't see that here. And so on. There are lots of reasonable reasons.

And yes, the Bible is complex, and incredibly diverse. Rowan Williams said it was like having in one book: Shakespeare's sonnets, the law reports for 1910, the introduction to Emmanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, the letters of St Anselm, and a fragment of the Canterbury Tales. Not a straight-forward read.

And certainly, it's not a 'look-it-up' book with the answers in the back. *It's the unfolding narrative of God at work in a messy, violent world, calling people into a new way of life.*

Ah, now that could be more interesting. It's calling us into a new way of life. That's the benefit. That could be exciting. The thing is to realise that the Bible is like a telescope. If you look **through it** you see worlds beyond. If you only look **at it**, you get stuck with a jumble of words, a dead letter. But look **through it**, and everything looks very different.

For me, that's the difference between sitting through a lecture, and being in conversation with the lecturer. And that's what we so often miss. The conversation.

I was reminded this week of the famous Spitting Image sketch in which Mrs Thatcher is in a restaurant with some of her cabinet colleagues such as Geoffrey Howe, Nigel Lawson and Norman Fowler. The waitress says to Mrs T: 'Would you like to order, sir?' Mrs T: Yes, I'll have a steak. Waitress: How do you like it? Mrs T: Oh, raw, please. Waitress: And what about the vegetables? Mrs T: Oh, they'll have the same as me.

When we read the Bible we're not all vegetables, reading it the same way, told what to do. We bring our own personalities, our experiences, world-views, questions, prejudices and so on. So we end up having a **conversation** with the text, rather than just reading it like we'd read a daily paper, for information.

We need to read the Bible not for information (we know what happens to the prodigal son; it's not going to change). We read the Bible for transformation, to be changed. A conversation is something you **enter**, not something you **look at**.

So how can we enter that conversation with the Bible? I want to suggest three ways this morning.

The first is simply to read a passage, no more than half a chapter, and ask yourself a single question: 'What does this passage say to me, right now?' That's the conversation. What's it

saying to me? Stick with it until that message, that question, that insight, that challenge takes shape, and you begin to engage with it. A good place to start is Mark's gospel.

A second way of having a conversation with the Bible is to follow the daily readings in what's known as the lectionary, and to use some notes to help. And I'm going to mention unashamedly the notes that I often write for, *Reflections for Daily Prayer*. It's from Church House Publishing and so it's kind of the official CofE Bible reading notes, following the lectionary and with writers who (in most cases) are supposed to know what they're talking about – in 300 words, a single page – written to interpret, encourage, challenge, help the reader with the passage. Simple. OK it costs 16.99 from Castle Hill bookshop (no commission) but it's for a whole year. 4.5p per day. Bargain. Other brands are available...

The third way of having a conversation with the Bible is a bit different. It's called lectio divina, holy reading, and it's been practised by Christians for hundreds and hundreds of years, but I find it's increasingly popular today because it really does what I was speaking about before – open the text up not just for information but for personal transformation. It enables the passage to get under our skin, to feed us in an entirely different way. There are three steps, with a possible fourth.

Here's today's second reading from Colossians. First step, **Read**. But read it slowly. Best of all, read it twice, once to see what it's about; the second time to see what phrase stands out for you, puts its head above the parapet, has a bit of extra colour, makes you pause.

Second step, **Reflect**. Stay with that phrase that stood out and chew it to get all the goodness you can out of it. Ponder it. Brood over it. Ask questions of it. Look at it from different angles. Keep chewing until you've got all the taste you can from it.

Third step, **Respond**. Read, reflect, respond. That means, pray about whatever has come out of your chewing of that phrase. It may be something you realise you're thankful for, something you want God's help with, some *body* who came to mind as you reflected on it. Anything that God has put on your heart. Talk with him about it.

Which brings us to an optional fourth step, which is **Rest**, just rest in the presence of God, which is the heart of prayer. No more words. Let the conversation settle in you, become part of you.

And that's it: read, reflect, respond, rest.

So let's try that. Me first and then you.....

Now you have a go: first **Read**, find the phrase that *sticks* to you. Then **reflect**, chew it. Brood over it until it yields its gifts. Then normally you could **respond** in prayer – and if you wish, **rest**, keep silence afterwards, letting God be God. But sadly we haven't got that much time right now, so try the **reading and reflecting** steps for 3 or 4 minutes.....

Three ways of having a conversation with the Bible. 1. Read a passage and ask what it says to you right now. 2. Use the lectionary with that book *Reflections for Daily Prayer* or any other Bible reading notes. And 3. Lectio divina.

But above all, my message is this: Let the Bible be not only a **timeless** book but a **timely** one, with things to say to us now. Martin Luther said: 'Scripture is the manger in which the infant Jesus lies. Don't let's inspect the cradle and forget to worship the baby.' He also said: 'The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold on me.'

So let's read it! Let's get into a conversation with that Bible that sits innocently on the shelf, quietly humming with life.