

Can we take the Bible Literally?

Date: 4 October 2020, 8th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's

Series: Exploring Christianity

Texts: Genesis 32:22-31; Luke 24:13-35

In his autobiography, the 4th century African theologian Augustine, tells of himself being at a crossroads. His life was a quest for truth and peace and love. After having explored philosophy and eastern religion he had begun to investigate the Christian faith. With some friends they set up what today might be called a retreat centre. The time there was one of deep reflection and self examination. On this particular day it all became too much for Augustine. He went outside for a walk in the garden and heard a child chanting, "Pick up and read. Pick up and read." Augustine took this as a divine command. He went back inside, picked up a Bible and read the first thing that he saw which happened to be from Romans 13 - "Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh." Now, those words might not mean much to you, but for Augustine they were pivotal. "At once," he writes, "with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All shadows of doubt were dispelled."¹

Pick up and Read. Picking up and reading the Bible changed Augustine's life. But that was 1700 years ago in a different time and place. Why would we think it has anything to say to us today? Why would we trust it? And even if we do, how should we read it? Hasn't it been used to justify all kinds of evil? What do we do with the miracles? Isn't that kind of thing just made up?

This is the 4th in our series *Exploring Christianity* looking at some of the big questions both believers and nonbelievers ask about the Christian faith. We've asked, "Aren't all religions basically the same?" and "Is God Green?" Last week Jeanne touched on how the Bible might speak to different cultures in different ways. Today we're asking "**Can you read the Bible literally?**" Now, I'm not entirely happy with this way of putting the question, but I want to tackle two aspects of this question. Why should we trust the Bible? And How should we read it?

Why should we trust the Bible?

The Bible makes some extraordinary claims, not least its central claim that the God who made the universe including you and me became the man Jesus of Nazareth and died on the cross for our forgiveness and that he rose from the dead, ascended into heaven and will come again in glory. I know that I can't give you an irrefutable answer to why you should trust the Bible when it makes claims like this, but I want to suggest two good reasons for approaching the Bible with an open mind.

¹ Augustine, *Confessions* VIII.xii (29)

Reason 1. What the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament tells us about Jesus is historically reliable. Luke himself begins his gospel by saying that he has spoken to the eyewitnesses in putting together his gospel.² In a landmark book *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Richard Bauckham demonstrates that at the time the Gospels were written eyewitnesses were still alive who could verify what the Gospels said about Jesus. For example when Mark's Gospel tells us about the man who carried the cross for Jesus on the road to his crucifixion, he names him as Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus.³ Why give this extra detail which has no bearing on the rest of the story? Bauckham argues that Mark dropped in these names, because they were known to the early Christian community. It's his way of saying "You know Alexander and Rufus. Go ask them, They can vouch for the truth of what I'm telling you."

Another example is Luke's relation to Mark. Luke starts the book of Acts in the 3rd person - reporting about others - they did this and said that. But then in chapter 16, the "*they*" changes to "*we*". It seems then that Luke was a travelling companion to Paul. This is confirmed in Colossians 3.14 where Paul says that Luke is with him. In Acts 12 we learn that one of Paul's other companions is John Mark.⁴ In about AD100, Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis, a city near Colossae, wrote a work called, *An exposition of the accounts of the Lord*. The work only survives in quotations from later writers. But in one of those quotations Papias says that he heard John the disciple of Christ and author of the 4th Gospel say that Mark in his capacity as Peter's scribe wrote down accurately as much as Peter recalled from memory⁵ - that is, the gospel of Mark.

So it appears that Luke knew both the apostle Paul and the apostle Peter's assistant John Mark, author of the gospel of Mark. These are the kinds of eyewitnesses and servants of the word who had handed down the authoritative accounts of Christ that Luke investigated and used to compose his gospel. So we should approach the Gospels with an open mind because they are historically reliable. Just think about that for a moment - when you read the Gospels you are getting first hand testimony to Jesus. Just imagine for a moment that what you read is true. How he healed the sick, how he taught how to live life like no one ever did, how he forgave his enemies, how he defeated death. If that was true, wouldn't it change your life?

That leads to a second reason to approach the Gospels, and, we might add, the rest of the Bible, with an open mind. Look at the difference the Bible has made to many people's lives. People like William Wilberforce who led the fight to abolish slavery. Or Florence Nightingale the founder of modern nursing. Martin Luther King Jr. Great scientists like Michael Faraday, James Maxwell, and even today Francis Collins, former head of the human genome project and the man coordinating the research for

² Luke 1.1-4

³ Mark 15.21

⁴ Acts 12.25; 15.35, 37

⁵ Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 202-3

a coronavirus vaccine in the USA. The hospital, the university, the 8 hour day, women's liberation were all pioneered by people putting the Bible's teaching to work. But perhaps the best place to look is closer to home. Look at people who have been meditating on the Bible for years so that it has soaked into their bones and seeps out their pores. I was speaking with someone this week who told me about her elderly Christian neighbour who always says hello and just exudes kindness and love. You can't be too careful, if you pick up the Bible and read it, it might transform your life too!

Ok. So two reasons why you can approach the Bible with an open mind, even trust it.

When we ask "can we read the Bible literally?" all sorts of things might be smuggled in under the word "literally". Perhaps a better question is **How should we read the Bible?**

Bad Reading

In the book club I attend we've just finished reading a work by the 19th century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer argues that, "Religion is truth expressed in allegory and myth" because most people are not smart enough to grasp the deep truths of life.⁶ Religion in that sense is a "pious fraud", "a short term aid" that people will abandon when they grow up, which is what we need to do.⁷ It's an argument that may sound familiar. Indeed Richard Dawkins' latest book is called, *Outgrowing God: A beginner's guide*. But importantly the "we" for Schopenhauer is not humanity in general, but Europeans in particular. Christianity is fine for peoples that he considers "still in the state of childhood," like Africans and South Sea Islanders.⁸

Now, we're right to take issue with the patronising racism and cultural superiority in Schopenhauer's words. But I wonder if it's actually central to this whole line of argument. Saying that you're childish and stupid if you're religious and particularly if you believe the Bible is really only something wealthy, white, Westerners say. The majority of the world's population are religious, as are non-whites in Western countries. The Bible has in fact for many peoples around the world, including in Australia, provided huge resources for resisting Western cultural imperialism.

All of which is to say that following Schopenhauer's argument that religion is truth dressed up as allegory, is, I suggest, a bad way to read the Bible. It imposes culturally conditioned assumptions on the Bible and forces it to fit those categories. There are many bad ways to read the Bible, but the common feature is, if you like, the sin of pride. That is where I put myself before the text, and expect it to fit with my assumptions, my expectations. It's where I am the judge over the text, choosing the

⁶ Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms*, trans. Hollingdale, Penguin, 1970:103

⁷ 109

⁸ 99

bits I like and ignoring the bits I don't. There are of course both conservative and progressive Christian forms of this, where one majors on what the Bible says about sex while ignoring what it says about justice for the poor and vice versa.

Good Reading

If that is bad reading of the Bible, what is good reading? Augustine is very helpful here.⁹ He takes Jesus' words from Matthew 22 that all the Law and Prophets hang on the two commands - Love God and love your neighbour as yourself, and argues that this be the interpretive principle we use to read the Bible. Loving God and loving our neighbour are the fundamental orientation of our lives as readers. They are also the goal of the Bible - to move us to love God and our neighbour. So how does this play out in how we read the Bible?

First, Augustine suggests, we try to understand the author's intended meaning. Love does not seek to dominate others, but gives them space to be what God has made them to be. When it comes to the Bible, that means paying attention to it and letting it speak on its own terms. This involves using skills of reading well - like not taking things out of context; letting the parts interpret the whole and the whole the parts. It means paying attention to the genre of a text. Asking, is this history, law, prophecy, song, proverb, parable, letter, and perhaps most difficult, apocalyptic. For example when Psalm 58:8 says "May they be like a slug melting away as it moves along", this is not a description of the biology of slugs, it's a word picture. When the Gospels record the trial and crucifixion of Jesus, they are speaking of flesh and blood events. Likewise they don't switch to allegory or metaphor in the next chapter when describing Jesus' resurrection.

As we pay attention to and let the Bible speak on its own terms, so we will let it guide how we interpret it. So when Jesus says, in Luke 24, that,

everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms,

we take it that Jesus is the interpretive key who unlocks the meaning of the whole Bible. And when Hebrews 1 says,

*In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, **2** but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe,*

we take it that Jesus is the climax of the story of the Bible, and that the Bible is nothing less than God speaking to us.

Even paying attention to the author's intent, with Christ as the unifying principle for the whole Bible, we still may find a number of interpretations of a particular text. What are we to do there? Starting from the point that God is the source of all truth, Augustine offers a helpful illustration. Picture a spring of water. When pushed

⁹ *Confessions*, XII.xxiii-xxxii

through a narrow space it increases in power and flows into many channels. So it is with the Bible, Augustine suggests. Each commentator is a different channel from the same spring. The way to discern the truth of a particular reading is whether it leads us to love God and love our neighbour.

To put this another way, we read the Bible together with the communion of saints. It's something we do together and we need to hear each other's voices so that we can see the fullness of God's truth. On a big level that means we listen to the diversity within the church - people from every nation and language and tribe. That also includes listening to our ancestors in the faith. That's why we say the Apostles Creed. On a local level, that's why we have Bible study groups - so we can pursue God's truth together and so learn to love each other. And, as Augustine says, we pray that God will grant us by his Spirit the true meaning of the text.

I want to finish with 3 models from the Bible of what good reading of the Bible looks like. Sometimes you will read a passage of Scripture that you find so confronting that you'll be tempted to just throw your hands up and walk away. I want to suggest that at that point we're invited to wrestle with the text like Jacob wrestled with God at the Jabbok river. He can't beat God, but he won't let go until God blesses him. In that wrestle God exposes Jacob as the deceiver. The encounter leaves him limping, but his identity is transformed to Israel and he is blessed. Love always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. That confrontation with Scripture is an encounter with God. So keep wrestling, because God will bless you through his Word.

Sometimes you'll read a passage that seems impossible, too good to be true. Mary is a model for us here. When the angel came to her saying that she would conceive and give birth to a son who would be called the Son of the Most High who would rule on David's throne forever, she asks the obvious question - "How can this be since I am a virgin?" The angel's answer is perhaps even more implausible. "The Holy Spirit will come on you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth, your cousin, is going to have a child in her old age ... because no word from God will ever fail." Mary responds: "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." Like Mary, we can ask the obvious practical question, how? But we're also invited to follow Mary's example and trust that God's word will not fail.

Sometimes we might find ourselves in a place like Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus, sad and confused, with hopes dashed, not understanding what you're reading. The invitation is to walk together with sisters and brothers and journey through all the Scriptures to see how they all speak of Christ. Maybe you have been on that journey but have not yet recognised Jesus. Did you notice in the text the two things that happened for them to see Jesus. First they invited Jesus in. Is that something that you need to do? Second, it was when Jesus took the bread, gave thanks and broke it that they recognised him. Every time we meet at the Lord's table

is an invitation for you to recognise and receive Jesus. He offers you his body - the bread of life, broken that you might be healed; his blood - shed for your forgiveness, that you might drink from him and never go thirsty.

Pick up and read. Yes the Bible can be difficult. There are lots of questions. But to read it is to hear God speak. Will you pick up and read?