

Transcript – Week 5 Message from Bishop Richard

I was never brilliant at maths at school. I remember the experience of maths lessons where the teacher tried to explain new concepts to the class. I recognised the individual words, but put together in a sentence, they made no sense to me at all. One of my most joyous moments was in my first year at university. I was taking a maths module where I didn't even understand the individual words, never mind when they were in a sentence. As I anticipated the humiliation of an exam where I would be able to answer precisely nothing, the joy I felt when I discovered the class was optional was unbounded!

There are hints of this in the in the HC reading from Luke for today, it says, "Jesus appeared to them and opened their minds so they could understand the scriptures. An aspect of the gospel accounts that gives them so much historic credibility is the way they portray the disciples as rather dense. Given that these men were the pillars of the early church it doesn't do much to establish their reliability. You can almost sense Jesus' exasperation with them at times as they frequently and spectacularly fail to get the point.

Post resurrection, He is very keen to help them see their experiences as part of a bigger picture of Gods purposes unfolding in history. The scriptures he was opening were the books of the Old Testament. Clearly, their meaning was not immediately obvious. Jesus had work to do to tease out their significance and application. What is clear however, is that He saw them as the ultimate authority and the lens through which their experiences should be understood. Indeed, the 39 articles of religion, to which all clergy swear allegiance when we are licenced, makes this commitment very clear. (Its Article 6 &7 if you are interested)

The great Anglican divine Richard Hooker is often quoted as the source of the 'three legged stool' of Anglican theological reasoning: scripture, reason and tradition. Some have suggested he sees these as equal in authority, but a closer reading shows that isn't what he meant. He saw scripture as having the ultimate authority for the Church. However, like the disciples, we need to use our reason to interpret and understand them and the tradition of the church means we stand on the shoulders of giants. The work of interpretation of former generations in different cultural settings, illuminates our own reading.

When we mine the Bible for proof texts with which to clobber people, or worse still quote bits of it out of context to make them mean something they clearly don't, we are not reading the Bible as Jesus did. Similarly, when we read bits that are clearly meant to be poetic or metaphorical as history, we get ourselves into all sorts of a pickle. We have wonderful resources of scholarship at our disposal just a mouse click away. Understanding the context

in which the texts were written and how they were first heard can enrich our understanding immeasurably.

But, we shouldn't despair that the Bible is so complex and impenetrable that we can only understand it properly through the ministry of trained professionals. I hope we are reading the Bible more in our time of lockdown. The illumination of the heart, soul and mind through the scriptures isn't a sterile intellectual activity. I have been a Christian for over 40 years and I still find, almost daily, things leap from the page at me in ways I haven't seen before. I have led small groups on Alpha courses many times and I have frequently had the experience of a new Christian sharing an insight from a text after which I needed to go and sit in a darkened room to digest it, such was the profundity.

And sometimes the deepest insights flow from the most difficult questions. There are bits of the Bible we can find downright confusing, distressing and even maddening. But if we stick with it, we will often find a mirror to our own experience. The questions we ask of the text can end up throwing a many questions back at us. I think it was Mark Twain who said, "its not the bits of the Bible I don't understand that give me problems, it's the bits I do."

In our lockdown, if you're unsure where to start. Read a gospel. Mark's is a great place to start. You may find the lectionary embedded in morning and evening prayer a help as it reads through the whole Bible over a three-year cycle.

I'll leave the last word to Christophe Chavasse, a former Bishop of Rochester. I hope it might inspire you as it has me.

"The Bible is the portrait of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Gospels are the figure itself in the portrait. The Old Testament is the background leading up to the divine figure, pointing towards it and absolutely necessary to the composition as a whole. The Epistles serve as the dress and accoutrements of the figure, explaining and describing it. Then by our Bible reading we study the portrait as a great whole, the miracle happens, the figure comes to life and stepping down from the canvas of the written word, the everlasting Christ of the Emmaus story becomes himself our Bible teacher, to interpret to us in all the scriptures the things concerning himself."