

Bible Sunday

St Brandon's

Romans 15:1-6; Luke 4:16-24

23 October 2022

As you'll have gathered, today is Bible Sunday. So I want to say something about the Bible, and how we should understand and read it, and try to say something from each of the two passages we've heard from Romans and Luke by way of application of the Bible. And I then want to apply all of that to the current debate on Christian teaching and learning about relationships and marriage – the 'Living in Love & Faith' project which we've heard a bit about before. And in all in 10 minutes ...?!

Let's begin with the reading from Romans. Here Paul is appealing for harmony among the Christians in Rome. The particular dispute was over what you could and couldn't eat, and 'the strong' at the beginning of the passage were those who reckoned that all food was OK to eat, while 'the weak' obviously had problems with that. It's very clear which side Paul was on since he talks about 'the failings of the weak'! But then he says that the strong shouldn't please themselves, but act so as to build up their weaker neighbour. And he gives the example of Christ who did not please Himself. But then he makes an interesting move by quoting from the Jewish Scriptures, our OT, to make the point: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me". Jesus accepted the insults, didn't put Himself first, didn't please Himself.

So, as well as an appeal for harmony – which we'll come back to – Paul is implying that this short excerpt from the Jewish Scriptures can be applied to Christ. And indeed, the psalm he is quoting from – Psalm 69 – is regarded as one of the 'Messianic' psalms that point on to Jesus. Elsewhere in that psalm we find the phrase, "... and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink" (Ps. 69:21) – and that, of course, seems to predict what happened to Jesus on the cross.

And Paul then goes on to generalise from that by saying, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the Scriptures [in other words, roughly our OT] we might have hope". So, while we should respect the fact, as Mike reminded us recently, that these are firstly the Jewish Scriptures, and recognise that we might very well have a lot to learn from their interpretation of their Scriptures, we are also right to have these as part of our Bible, right to learn from them, and right to see how they point on to Christ.

So here, in this passage from our Bible, we have a straightforward message for us today: look out for your weaker neighbour; don't please yourselves; follow the example of Christ even to the point of bearing insults; live in harmony. And there is consistency between the OT and the NT in this, so that the message couldn't be clearer. The Bible speaks to us unequivocally about these things.

So what about Jesus in our gospel reading? There is Jesus in His home synagogue, and with the opportunity to read and preach. He is given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and apparently it is He who chooses to read from Isaiah 61 v.1&2. The passage, as we've heard,

is about good news for the poor, release for captives, sight for the blind and freedom for the oppressed. And it is not just a general statement about these things, but a personal one too: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news ...". Who is it that the Spirit is upon? Who is it that has been anointed? To whom does this prophecy apply? And when might it be fulfilled? And, as we know, Jesus, sitting down and with all eyes fixed upon Him, gives them the answer: it's me, and it's now. This prophecy found its fulfilment at that precise moment in the person of Jesus.

Now, again, there's a lesson for us here in that Jesus is claiming that, as we long for a world put right, where the poor receive good news, captives are released, the blind receive their sight, the oppressed go free, and so on and on, the ultimate fulfilment of those longings is to be found in Christ, in whom, as Paul says elsewhere, all things have already been reconciled to God (Col. 1:20), a reconciliation that we will, in God's good time, see fulfilled in its entirety.

But Jesus is also telling us, as Paul has done in our Romans reading, that we should look back to the Jewish Scriptures, to our OT, to find there prophecies that apply to and are fulfilled in Him. But then He is also doing something rather important as He does that. For He does not include in His reading of the passage from Isaiah the second half of the second verse. He stops reading at a comma: "to proclaim the day of the Lord's favour" comma, except He makes it a full stop and doesn't finish the sentence which goes on to say, "and the day of vengeance of our God". He, it seems deliberately, does not proclaim the day of vengeance of our God, but finishes with the proclamation of the Lord's favour. Mmm.

Is He right to exclude this? Well, He is God after all, so presumably yes. But why does He exclude it? Well, the passage would have been familiar to His hearers, and it seems as though He wants to make a point. It seems as though He wants to disassociate Himself from the violence associated with a vengeful God, and by doing that to stress the Lord's favour. And in doing that, He seems to be undermining anything in the Jewish Scriptures, our OT, which associated God with violence. And, so it seems, He then went on to live this out in His life, including being willing to accept the insults that should have fallen on others, to accept the violence done to Him in His passion and death, and not to respond violently in return.

Now you'll have noticed that I've used 'it seems' quite a lot because, unlike the passage from Romans where the message couldn't have been clearer and there was consistency between the OT and NT, here we're having to work a lot harder to interpret what's going on, and there is an apparent lack of consistency between the OT and NT. Jesus seems to be re-defining the nature of God as a God of non-violence.

Now, of course, we would have to do a lot more work to confirm that conclusion (and I tried to do that in a sermon a while back), but for this morning the important point is that sometimes it's not straightforward to interpret Scripture. The message it conveys isn't always as clear and unequivocal as we saw when looking at the passage from Romans. We have to say, "it seems to me ..."

Now, in a way, that's a pretty obvious conclusion, and what it means is that for those of us who preach, and for all of us as we listen, we need to be alert to the fact that while

sometimes the message couldn't be clearer, at other times it's not, and when it's not we need to work hard on coming to a conclusion as to what a particular passage, or Scripture more generally, seems to be saying to us. We need to acknowledge that in those cases we are in the business of trying to *interpret* Scripture and to apply it to our context.

And so to relationships and marriage. This is the 'Living in Love & Faith' project that the CofE has been running for a while now. Some of us looked at this in groups that ran in Lent this year, and we explored it in a morning service sometime in the Spring. The CofE has been running a consultation on that material, has just published a new report based on that consultation called 'Listening with Love and Faith', and General Synod is due to debate all this in February next year.

Now obviously, in the 10 minutes I've got left (!), we can't do justice to the whole of this, so let's focus on the one part (and it is only one part of a complicated whole) which is about marriage and, in particular, same-sex marriage. And you can bet that that will be the one part that will hit the headlines in due course.

¹[Originally] a broad consensus developed in the teaching of the Church that a clear biblical picture of marriage emerges when you consider Scripture as a whole, and in particular when you read it in the light of the teaching of Jesus. Faithfulness and monogamy are also central in this account. As a by-product of seeing faithfulness and exclusivity as central to marriage, the Church also taught that intimate sexual activity has its proper place only within a committed, faithful, permanent relationship – and this type of relationship is described in Scripture and tradition as 'marriage'.

From this perspective, relationships that deviate from this ideal (including same-sex relationships) tend to be portrayed negatively in biblical stories and condemned in legal and ethical teaching because they depart from these creational and covenantal norms for marriage. This then is taken as a normative account, which can be held up as an ideal or template.

So, going back to what I said earlier, this approach can be characterised as one in which Scripture gives us clear, unequivocal teaching, and all we need to do is to receive it and follow it.

However, the Church has also had to respond to the complex realities of life, and developments in our scientific understanding of human sexuality, and therefore accounts have developed that still honour the norm or ideal, yet make space for variance. Thus, in recent years, some Christians have argued that the Bible's view of marriage can legitimately include same-sex couples. They agree that the overall picture of marriage in Scripture tends towards loving faithfulness and covenant loyalty. But the absence of same-sex relationships in Scripture is seen as arising simply because the historical context of the time did not envisage such relationships as being able to embody these qualities of marriage. This may

¹ What follows is taken from 'Living in Love & Faith', Church House Publishing, 2020, pp.280-283. Available from [Living in Love and Faith | The Church of England](#).

be due to different cultural norms, to embedded cultural prejudice or because same-sex behaviour that was visible was transient and exploitative.

So, going back to what I said earlier, this approach can be characterised as one in which Scripture does not give us clear, unequivocal teaching, and so we need to work hard on coming to a conclusion as to what a particular passage, or Scripture more generally, seems to be saying to us. We need to acknowledge that in this case we are in the business of trying to *interpret* Scripture and to apply it to our context.

So advocates of the two approaches to marriage both appeal to the Bible and try to read it carefully. They emerge, however, with different understandings of what the Bible requires of us – different understandings of what might be meant by a ‘biblical view of marriage’.

So where does that leave us? Well, as a minimum, it leaves us, and the CofE more generally, with a lot of work still to do in trying to come to a common mind as to what a ‘biblical view of marriage’ is, and then possibly a lot of work to do in making whatever changes the CofE decides might be appropriate, if any. And in doing that, we still need to abide by the unequivocal teaching of our reading from Romans, that we should look out for our weaker neighbour; don’t please ourselves; follow the example of Christ even to the point of bearing insults; and live in harmony.

That will not be easy, but then maintaining unity while seeking truth, never has been.

Amen.