

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE (Lindfield 11th August 2019)

With many current controversies being discussed in the media much hinges on how we understand the Bible and its message. If we don't follow a few basic principles we get into all sorts of strife as we can make the Bible say anything we want it to. A well-known saying in Theological and academic circles is: *a text without a context is a pretext*. That basically means what I just said. If you take any verse or paragraph at random without looking at its original meaning you can get a distorted or even opposite understanding of its meaning. So what do we look for? How do we understand what the Bible is saying? We need to follow a few basic principles:

- 1. What kind of literature is it?** The Bible is a library of 66 books and that library has all sorts of different kinds of literature. There's history, poetry, letters, gospel and apocalyptic. You know that we don't treat these all the same. Poetry uses language that is rich in symbolism. Metaphors, similes, poetic descriptions abound. We know these are describing something rather than literally giving facts about the subject. The Poetic books are Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs (Solomon). When Psalm 23 describes God as "my shepherd" we understand that God is not an actual shepherd but rather He acts in some ways like a good shepherd would act in caring for his sheep. The History books: Gen. 12 and following, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers Deuteronomy Joshua, Judges, 1,2 Samuel, 1,2 Kings, 1,2, Chronicles. These are mainly about life in Israel. They describe ritual, religious, civil laws as well as regulations for temple and synagogue worship. Gospel is a special category describing events within the life of Jesus that are related by the Gospel writers to convince us of their reasons for putting pen to paper. For example, Mark 1:1 *This is the good news about Jesus Christ the Son of God*". That is why there are events told in more than one of the Gospels and some mentioned only once or twice. Then in the New Testament there are letters. We know how we write letters, that we tell different people different things and so on. Apocalyptic Literature: Ezekiel, Daniel and Revelation are highly symbolic in their descriptions, almost like a secret code telling of future events. We ought not determine our beliefs or theology solely from this type of literature as its too easy to misinterpret.
- 2. What was the Original Context? Who were the first recipients?** This is critical. We need to try and understand who were the first hearers of the book and what would it have meant to them. For instance in Revelation John speaks of the "bear from the north" swiping down and destroying believers. During the 1940s-70s (mostly) American evangelicals interpreted this as Russia (Cold War) wanting to expand Communism and destroy Christianity. The people to whom John wrote would have known nothing of this. To John's readers it was obviously Rome as the persecution of Christians had already begun. Paul forbids women to preach in Ephesus but does not do so in Corinth. He forbids Corinthian women to wear elaborate jewelry lest they tempt men to lust but never mentions it anywhere else. If we don't take the time to understand the context we will often misinterpret the Bible.
- 3. What about Jesus?** Jesus came to fulfil the Law. We believe he is the Messiah, the promised one, the Christ of God. Because of Him the Old Testament Law has served

it's purpose. It no longer applies. Jesus said he had come not to destroy the Law but to fulfil it. He said that all the commandments could be summarised down to two: *Love God with all your heart and your neighbour as yourself*. This is why in the Marriage Equality Debate and the controversy with Israel Folau's Church I have dismissed anyone who quotes Leviticus 20:13 *If a man has sexual relations with a man as one has with a woman both of them are detestable. They are to be put to death*" But they do not quote Lev, 19:28 *Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on them. V. 37 Keep all my decrees and all my laws and follow them. I am the Lord*. It shows that they do not understand how to interpret the Bible. Israel Folau has tattoos. The Christian will interpret all Scripture through the filter of Jesus.

4. **The Word of God.** If you had asked me 20 years ago, What is the word of God? I would have answered The Bible. I now believe that statement to be incorrect. John 1:1-2 *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning*. The Uniting Church's Foundational Document, The Basis of Union says, *Christ who is present when he is preached among people is the Word of God who acquits the guilty, who gives life to the dead and who brings into being what otherwise could not exist*. (Para. 4). Jesus of Nazareth is the Word of God.

5. **Inspired? Inerrant?** The Bible was written by people for people. As there are different types of literature there are very different styles of writing. Paul writes differently to John. Peter writes differently to Luke and so on. They all write to different people for different purposes. Yet, from Genesis to Revelation there is a unity of message and purpose. Paul would not have had access to the Gospels (except maybe Mark?) when he wrote his letters. Revelation completes what begins in Genesis. I certainly do not believe that God dictated words for the Biblical authors to write down. The Bible has some contradictions and some errors which you have to explain away if you think it is inerrant. Fundamentalists believe that every word in the Bible is there because God wanted it there so there cannot be any errors. That view is, I believe impossible to maintain with any integrity. Biblical literalists have to condemn people with tattoos or who cook beef and chicken in the same pan as they do adulterers and homosexuals. That is clearly silly. The unity of the Bible is I believe truly miraculous. I believe God via His Spirit oversaw or superintended the writing of the Scriptures so that the unity of message and purpose was maintained and its readers would read these words from God so they could come to know the God of the Word.

The Scriptures, just like Jesus, came to us so we can know God, love God and serve God who is Creator, Redeemer and Comforter. For them, just we are for Jesus we are glad to proclaim: **THANKS BE TO GOD.** AMEN.
