

Today we have two stories about reading the Bible. They are very different. In the story from the book of Nehemiah, the people have gathered in the open, in the midst of the ruins of Jerusalem. The Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, had conquered Judah and destroyed the city. The dramatic story is told at the end of the book of Chronicles, **“The king of the Chaldeans..killed their youths in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on the young man or the young woman, the aged or the feeble...All the vessels of the house of God, large and small and the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king and his officials, all these he brought to Babylon. They burned the house of God, broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all the palaces with fire...He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword.”** You can say that nothing changes. That was seventy years before. Now the first exiles have begun to return by order of the new, Persian, King Cyrus.

They repair the walls as best they can and then they gather amidst the ruins of the city to listen to the word of the Lord. One of the things that is very important is that the words were *interpreted*. **“So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.”** Jewish teachers believed that the activity and purposes of God can be seen in history. So, the destruction of Jerusalem was the result of a decision by God, it was a punishment for the worship of foreign idols. Jeremiah had said, **“You have rejected me, says the Lord, you are going backward; so I have stretched out my hand and destroyed you.”** Of course they needed to make sense of what had happened to them. And their answer; God is all powerful, so God must be responsible. They had sinned, they had been punished. Now the time of punishment is over, God had forgiven them, they had returned from exile.... Most of us find this way of thinking rather difficult, is this really the way that God operates? But some people still do think like this. One such is the American, so called Christian evangelist, Pat Robertson, founder of the far right wing, Christian Coalition. This is a man who in my opinion, does for the reputation of Christianity what the Taliban does for the reputation of Islam. He said last week that the terrible earthquake in Haiti is the result of the pact with the Devil made by the leaders of the revolution who first gained freedom from the French 200 years ago. The earthquake is therefore God’s judgement and punishment. Whatever you may think of this sort of biblical interpretation, (and my opinion of this blasphemous twaddle is not one that could be given from a pulpit,) it does represent one strand of biblical thinking. Ezra the priest was reminding the people of their responsibilities, they had been called by God, they were his people, he had given them the law. Their duty was to obey and follow the true God. This was a new beginning for the Jews, a new start. Let it then, he says be a time of rejoicing, a time when God’s favour has been restored.

The Gospel reading is set in a very different time, and a very different place. Jesus is beginning his ministry in the synagogue in Nazareth, and he uses the prophecies of Isaiah to say who he is and what he is doing. Like the proclamation by Ezra, it is also an announcement of a time for rejoicing. He is saying, that with his coming, there is good news for the poor, the blind will see, the captive will be released, the oppressed will go free. These are prophecies from Isaiah about the age of the Messiah. Quite clearly Jesus is claiming to be the Messiah. **“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”** In the time of Jesus of course, the only scriptures were what we call the Old Testament, the old covenant. When Ezra read out the laws of Moses, what is now I guess the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus, he was saying that they have authority, that they come from God. Jesus is saying the same thing, these scriptures have authority because they tell of the coming of the Messiah.... my coming.

However, I think the authority given to Scripture by Christians is different from the authority given to scripture by Jews. For us the scriptures have authority because they talk about Jesus; the OT *foretells* his coming, the NT *describes* his coming. Orthodox Jews I think, believe that the Bible is *itself* the revelation of God, the book therefore is all important. How we should behave, respond to God, respond to each other they believe is laid down in the book. Indeed, they would describe themselves as the people of the Book. Christians are not the people of a Book; we are the people of Jesus.

So how should we read the scriptures today? Anglicans have always believed that there are three pillars on which faith should be based. First of course the Bible, second the tradition and experience of 2000 years of Christian history, and the Jewish experience before that. And the third pillar is our own native intelligence which God has given to us.

The Bible is an astonishing, unique testament, a collection of histories, prophetic judgements, laws, meditations, songs of worship, collective wisdom. It is the record of the winding quest of a remarkable people to meet and respond to the One God who had revealed himself to them and through them, to us. For Christians it has authority and importance for here Jesus is foretold and here Jesus is revealed. It teaches us, it reassures us, our understanding is nourished by it, our faith is increased by it.

Tradition properly understood is not a mechanical handing down of what is received. We must see tradition from *within*. Tradition is more than just doctrine; it is a life, a personal encounter with Christ in the Holy Spirit. Tradition is the life of the Holy Spirit within the church. It is not a dead experience of the past but a living experience of the Holy Spirit in the present. Always tradition will be enriched by new insights, new knowledge, new understandings. Tradition is the witness of the Spirit, the Spirit's unceasing revelation and preaching of good tidings. Tradition is not only a protective, conservative principle it is, primarily, the principle of growth and regeneration. As a Catholic priest in California, I know said. "Tradition is not wearing you father's hat, it is having babies." Tradition draws not only on the faith of the past but also on the new discoveries and thoughts of the present, scientific, social, philosophical, psychological, medical. Tradition stops us living in a vacuum.

God gave us brains and he expects us to use them; even when we read the Bible. We live in a very different world today from the times when any of the books of the Bible were written. The world was not made in six days 6000 yrs ago.... The remarkable meditation about the Garden of Eden is about human experience not objective history... Darwin got it about right... No matter what the Bible says slavery is not acceptable.... No what St Paul might have said women are not inferior to men.... Despite the stories in Joshua and Samuel, it is never permissible to massacre prisoners..... Despite the visions of the Apocalypse, the world is not in danger of destruction because of human sinfulness, though human civilization may be.... Banking is not a sin, even though some bankers are sinners and some people use financial strength to exploit others.... No matter what Ezra, or the ridiculous Robertson and his ilk, may have thought and taught, God does not send ravaging armies, or suicide bombers, or cause tsunamis or earthquakes to destroy thousands of people as a punishment.

The Bible, Tradition and our own brains however do agree on this; God through Jesus, has taught us that He is Love, and that all those who live in love live in Him, and He in them. And this is eternal life.