

How might Anglicans better interpret what we read in the Bible?

A Study Guide for “What the Anglican Communion has said about the Bible: Themes and Principles emerging from official and semi-official Anglican Communion documents”

Introduction to the Study Guide

Have you ever wondered “What does the Anglican Communion believe about ...? An easy answer is hard to find!

One approach is to trace the thinking of the Anglican Communion over time through its classic theologians and foundation documents. These include historic 16/17th texts, Lambeth Conference resolutions, Reports from Anglican Commissions and our ecumenical conversations (such as ARCIC). So, if you asked ‘*what does the Anglican Communion believe about the Bible?*’ then “**What the Anglican Communion has said about the Bible: Extracts from official and semi-official Anglican Communion documents**” outline what has been said officially about such matters. While they are consistent in what has been said over time, they also show developments in Anglican thinking. Certain Themes emerge from these texts which help summarise the position we, as Anglicans, take on this question [*these are summarised in Section 3 of this Study Guide*].

Other ways of framing the Themes are likely, however, and perhaps some Themes are missing. If your group feels that either of these are the case then we would be delighted to hear from you

Let’s start a conversation

But this Study Guide wants to go one step further. Are there guidelines that can assist us, as Anglicans, in the way we interpret what we read in Scripture? Those responsible for the *Bible in the Life of the Church* project¹ discerned **Seven Principles** which they derived from a number of Anglican sources: the Themes, regional research and contemporary Anglican hermeneutic insights. They are offered in order to start a conversation, a conversation about how Anglicans seek to listen to what Scripture says. These are set out in Section 2 of this Study Guide and referred to in the final question in each study session.

Let’s test them out

So this Study Guide is an invitation - an invitation to help the Communion test out these Principles by holding them up against Scripture. In each of the 5 session outlines that follow, you are invited to engage with and explore one or two passages of Scripture with the **Principles** in mind. The passages have been chosen so that over the sessions, you will have encountered most of the different kinds of literature in the Bible.

Each session offers some short notes to set the passages in their wider context, both the book of the Bible in which each appears, and in the Bible as a whole. Two sorts of questions are provided: some to help you explore each passage, others to examine the **Principles**.

¹ The list of those on the Steering Group for the project can be found on pages 66 & 67 of *Deep Engagement; Fresh Discovery*





To help make your discussions part of an 'Anglican Communion conversation', a means of feeding back your observations, comments, questions or differing points of view is included. These will be read and incorporated into the final report of the Project, due to be published in early 2016.

For a fuller discussion of the *Extracts, Themes and Principles* the documents referred to above that were produced as part of the first phase of the "Bible in the Life of the Church" project can be found on the Anglican Communion website.

Extracts document: <http://goo.gl/mL9z48>
Themes and Principles: <http://goo.gl/ipwdcJ> (English)
<http://goo.gl/Og99nI> (French)
<http://goo.gl/HU1pGb> (Spanish)



Section 1 – A five session Bible engagement

Scripture passages for each session

Session 1 – Matthew 1

Session 2 – Job 38 and Philippians 2

Session 3 – Psalm 137 and Exodus 15

Session 4 – Isaiah 6 and Revelation 22

Session 5 – Hebrews 3:7-4:16

Session 1

Bible passage: Matthew 1

Introduction

The Bible as we now have it is a body of writings arranged in two sections, the Old and New Testaments. Matthew's Gospel is placed as the first book of the second, the first piece of writing encountered as this collection of 66 books moves to those written after the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Standing in this position makes Matthew 1 a kind of gateway from one Testament into another. It thus make a good starting point to explore how we read, interpret and apply to our lives what the Bible is saying to us.

But what sort of start does this chapter get the New Testament off to? This chapter is often read as though it begins at verse 18 - after all, the previous 17 verses are a list of names of people we know little or nothing about! Why read that? Because, *for example, these names summarise the whole story of God's work through Israel: Matthew regards the Old Testament as the foundation for understanding the significance of the Lord Jesus.* Hopefully, through this study, we will discover the list is anything but irrelevant, and offers an important and necessary foundation to understand the true significance of the birth of Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

Background notes: Matthew 1

Genealogies – the list of the names of the ancestors of the person being written about – are an important ancient literary form. They are used to locate the person in their family, tribe and nation - a significant practice for many indigenous peoples. Picking and choosing which ancestors to mention is not an option - people of both virtuous memory and those the writer might wish to forget about are in. So Matthew's genealogy places Jesus not only in the line of the greats like Abraham and David, but many others, known and unknown, who form part of his ancestral line.

Scholars tell us that Matthew's Gospel was probably written, in the first instance, for a Jewish community of believers in the Way [the early Church]. For them especially, but also for Christians from every background, it was important to be shown that Jesus, the Messiah, shared the heritage that the first Testament gives witness to, God's saving work through Israel for all people.

Having placed Jesus in this line and heritage, Matthew then goes on to describe his birth through the eyes of Joseph. The announcement of his forthcoming birth has both a heavenly side– angels, dreams, a miraculous conception, a significant name – but also a very human one, with Joseph contemplating breaking his engagement to Mary.





Two aspects of the genealogy are particularly noteworthy. First, the inclusion of four significant women; their lives form part of the unfolding story of the nation of Israel, both its seamy and hopeful sides. Their stories can be found in these sections of the Bible: Tamar [*Genesis 38*]; Rahab [*Joshua 2 and 6:17-25*]; Ruth [*the Book of Ruth*]; and Solomon's mother, 'the wife of Uriah' [*Bathsheba: 2 Samuel 11:1-13; 1 Kings 1:1-31; and 2:13-25*].

Second, the arrangement of the names in three groups of fourteen (1:17) structures the list over three main periods in the story of God's saving work from Abraham, the person called out by God, to David, the great king; from David to the exile in Babylon; and from the exile to Jesus, the saviour (1:22).

Questions

1. Look through the names of those listed in the genealogy and pick one or two characters you know something about. After sharing what you know, what kind of picture emerges of the sort of people Jesus' ancestors were?
2. There are four women in the list – Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Solomon's mother. What might we learn from the fact that they were included within the genealogy?
3. Matthew's account of the announcement of the birth of Jesus (1:18-24) is brief but full of insights that only come from these verses. What insights can we take from them?

And finally

4. As you reflect on how you explored these questions, which of the Seven Principles helpfully described your discussion? Would you wish to add any other principles to enable us to hear what Matthew is saying to us today in the 21st Century?

Sharing our insights

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<http://www.aco.org/ministry/theological/bible/comments.cfm>

Next session's passages: Job 38 & Philippians 2



Session 2

Bible passages: Job 38 & Philippians 2

Introduction

Most of the 'books' which make up the Bible relate to specific times and places. Some tell the story of God's work in Israel, some of Jesus and some of the early churches, for example. Others document the teaching of prophets and apostles. One of these is Paul's letter to the church at Philippi, written just twenty years after Jesus' earthly life concluded. Its message concerns issues faced by particular Christians - Epaphroditus, Euodia and Syntyche for example. Yet Paul is led to reflect on the meaning and implications of the gospel in ways which transcend the particularity of Philippi in AD 53. Philippians 2 is a classic example of how an early Christian community was challenged to come to grips with God's time-full truth revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ.

A few biblical 'books' have no specific location, however - the Psalms and Proverbs are perhaps the most familiar, while Job is the most extended such work. Through the inter-twining discourses between the man Job and his 'friends' there weaves profound reflection on the meaning of 'life, the universe and everything'. The opening and closing chapters are well known - Job being set up in a cosmic trial and eventually being vindicated. There is some familiarity with the dialogues of the next thirty or so chapters. But the closing chapters in which the divine silence is finally ended and God addresses Job are less known: Job 38, in its seemingly pointless questioning about wild animals, exemplifies what this book seeks to communicate to all times and places.

Background notes: Job 38

Job, a man faithful to God and rich in all that life offers, loses everything - and he hasn't a clue why. Did he - or his forebears - commit some terrible deed, for which he is being punished? Is he the victim of some inscrutable principle of retribution? Does Job's stubborn insistence on his innocence reveal a sub-conscious attitude of rebellion which needed to be tamed?

Like us when existence suddenly becomes unfathomable, Job finds himself feeling increasingly alone as his 'friends' multiply reams of unhelpful advice. (*It is essential when citing from chapters 3-37 to check who is speaking. Much of what is said - often corresponding to the 'nice and easy' theologies of popular religion - is rejected as false by God in chapter 42.*) Job curses his birth-day, despairs of life and feels hopeless - but insists on his innocence, and persists in demanding that God say something, anything so that he knows he is being heard.

And finally, in chapter 38, the silence of heaven ends - and God speaks, "out of the whirlwind". The divine voice does not condemn Job, but commands him to "Gird up your loins like a man. I will question you, and you shall declare to me" (*Job 38.3*). No longer does Job question God, but God questions Job, thus treating him as a conversation partner, albeit the junior one.

God's questions to Job which follow cover an amazing range of existence - from the foundations of the land to the depth of the seas, from the vast heavens and their zodiacs to the raven and lion, from the morning light to the hail which is employed as a divine weapon in war, from snow and ice to deserts and wasteland ...



The chapter following sustains the pace, with Job quizzed about his understanding of animals, notably the horse. Chapters 40-41, after Job has again been told to "gird up your loins like a man", - then offer an astonishing reflection on rhinoceroses (*Behemoth*) and crocodiles (*Leviathan*) - animals familiar in Africa and the tropics but not in today's west!

People continue to face pointless suffering, pestered by unhelpful associates and feeling abandoned by God. New forms of misery seem to appear, as initiatives in technology open up new possibilities for human existence. Yet they also pose sharp questions as to whether our well-being is at the expense of other creatures. What are we to make of God's response to Job, which apparently satisfies him?

Questions

1. In Job 38, quickly work through the different areas of creation about which God questions Job (*and readers since*). What does this say about the place of us humans in relation to other creatures? In relation to God?
2. Job is told several times, "Gird up your loins!" and stand before God as a conversation partner - while being bombarded with questions which stress his ignorance. What does this say about the ways in which we might live when living seems pointless, meaningless and godless?
3. In chapter 42, Job's integrity is ultimately affirmed by God; the opinions of his associates damned; and Job's fortune restored twice over. How might this 'happy ending' speak, or not, to people of faith enduring sustained suffering?

Background notes: *Philippians 2*

At the centre of this chapter stands a passage which reads like a poem or song - notice the different way in which verses 5-11 are set out in modern translations, to bring out this change of style. Paul seems to be citing an early Christian hymn - very early indeed if it is already quotable only 20 years after the first Easter!

This celebrates the story of Christ from beginning to end, hinged around his "obedience even to death, death on a cross". It forms an important early witness to the formation of Christian belief about the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus, his obedience, humanity and present status as the Name-bearing Lord of all, to whom all owe allegiance.

Yet Paul does not cite the hymn in the first place because he wants Euodia, Syntyche and company to learn sound doctrine. He is pleading for a community in which love, a common mind and humility are to the fore, with selfish ambition, arguing and pride and left behind. This practical concern frames the hymn, which is cited to illustrate his point (verses 1-4) and then to fill it out with his own example (verses 16-18) and that of Epaphroditus (*verse 30*).

Also in this chapter can be seen the inter-weaving of the grand schemas of God's salvation and the lives of particular people - Paul, Timothy, Epaphroditus - as they worked this out in their daily living, a matter of deeply serious as well as joy-filled import (*verse 12*).





In these ways Paul shows the blending of 'doctrinal' and 'practical' concerns which typify all his letters - each was, after all, penned for a specific church in a particular time and place. And because his teaching is grounded in truth about Christ which transcends time and place, it has continued to speak to generations since, and in places far distant from that now defunct sea-port.

In the 'Prayer for the Church Militant' in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer we pray "for all Bishops and Curates, that by their life and doctrine they may set forth thy true and lively Word, and rightly and duly minister thy holy sacraments". This expresses precisely what Paul wants to get across to the Philippian Christians - life and doctrine as a single cloth woven through the ministry of the gospel in the Word proclaimed audibly and visibly.

Questions

4. Read slowly through the 'hymn' in Philippians 2:5-11. Why do you think it says nothing of Christ's life and teaching as examples of humble obedience? (*You might also like to compare it to the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds.*)
5. The notes claim that Paul's use of this hymn comes out of and leads into his practical concerns. To what extent do you agree with this reading of the chapter? What implications does this have for how we read other letters in the New Testament?
6. Consider what Paul says about his own experience, and those of Timothy and Epaphroditus. What does this mean for how we 'read' our own lives?

And finally

7. As you reflect on how you explored these questions, which of the Seven Principles helpfully described your discussion? Would you wish to add any other principles to enable us to hear what the book of Job and the letters of Paul are saying to us today in the 21st Century?

Sharing our insights

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Next session's passages: Psalm 137 & Exodus 15



Session 3

Bible passages: Psalm 137 & Exodus 15

Introduction

The book of Psalms is a body of texts, ostensibly of a hymnic nature, but one that actually exhibits a variety of styles, situations and contexts. The texts apparently derive from a variety of hands; sometimes the psalm is attributed to David, sometimes to a figure known as Asaph, and sometimes the psalm remains merely anonymous. Furthermore, the whole of the section of Scripture called 'Psalms' divides into five sub-sections or books, and even within these constituent portions, diversity remains. We find so-called enthronement psalms pronouncing the accession of a royal figure; we see psalms of lament reflecting the pain of an individual or of corporate Israel; or we happen up on wisdom psalms, grappling with the nitty-gritty issues of life. And of course, there are even texts that do sound like hymns, and which, over the years, have found their way into the hymnody of our churches.

Hence Israel's "songbook" is neither monochrome, nor a simple set of hymns; there is no such thing as a typical psalm. Therefore, part of working with a psalm is getting a handle of what sort of text it is, attending to its shape, to its poetry, and to the distinctive voice or voices it yields. The Psalms are also the part of the Hebrew Bible to which the New Testament writers turned most often, when trying to make sense of the Christ event. Such usage – whether of the royal Psalm 110 or of the cry of distress in Psalm 22 – continues to reflect the different approaches or treasures found within the Psalms.

Exodus shares the diversity of Psalms. The exodus story is one to which various biblical writers – both Old and New Testament – constantly refer back, and it is continually remembered in the Passover festival that Jews celebrate each year. The text of Exodus, however, goes beyond dealing with just this event, and is rather an amalgam of narratives. Whilst it does, as its name suggests, map the exodus of Israel out of Egyptian slavery, and the resultant demise of the Egyptians, it also takes Israel's story on. It moves to the giving of the law on Sinai, along with Israel's response to the gift, namely the building of the Golden calf. The final parts of Exodus describe – in great detail – the design and formation of the tabernacle, the divine presence within Israel.

Background notes: Psalm 137

Few texts of the Old Testament are as challenging, or as difficult, as Ps 137. What begins as Israel's lament for the songs of their homeland turns into an imprecatory exhortation, demanding, or urging, the demise of their enemies' children. The Psalmist identifies the location as the 'rivers of Babylon', and this sets the context for the lament. The exile in Babylon (6th century BCE) was a significant point in Israel's story, with many Israelites deported from the familiarity of their Jerusalem homeland. Naturally, being in exile made the regular practice of their worship and culture effectually difficult – "how can we sing the song of Lord when away from Zion?" laments the Psalmist, likely, it seems, facing the taunts of those who have placed Israel in exile. In response, the Psalmist sets his mind on Jerusalem and its former glories; one's culture and identity matter more perhaps when one is away from home.

But the Psalmist does not leave it at this mournful lament. Had it done so, the Psalm would not have gained the infamy that it has accrued. The Psalmist's yearning for a return to Jerusalem, and for the



ability to sing afresh the Lord's song in their homeland, turns into an exhortation to smash babies' heads against walls. This is not the only incidence of violence in the Hebrew Scriptures – one thinks of the so-called herem passages of Joshua and the exhortation to kill Canaanites , [e.g. *Joshua 6:15-21*] or of the rape of Tamar by her half-brother Amnon [*2 Samuel 13:1-22*] – but the move from poignant lament to violent outburst is shocking and many readers are left deeply troubled by the move.

Questions

1. Read through the Psalm several times. How do you find the move from lament to imprecation? What might have occasioned the move?
2. What does it mean to read/interpret this text as a 'psalm' or hymn? How does its style and genre impact on your understanding of it?

Background notes: Exodus 15

Exodus 15 also takes hymnic form, or at least, the majority of it does so. The first hymn is sung by Moses, the second – a single verse, and therefore far shorter – is uttered by Miriam. Like the Psalm, the songs relate to, or celebrates, military victory over a sworn enemy. The difference is, of course, that Exodus 15, rather than yearning for or anticipating such vindication, actually celebrates and proclaims a victory already won, specifically the demise of Egyptian soldiers within the Red Sea. It may not demand the demise of babies, and it may relate to the demise of their former oppressor, but the hymns nonetheless celebrate YHWH's victory and characterize YHWH as a quintessentially warrior figure. When God frees the oppressed it means real and messy involvement in a real world.

After the hymns, but still within the chapter as we know it, comes another "water-orientated" narrative, as the water of Marah (*so called because of its bitterness*) is turned sweet. Israel has just celebrated the demise of the Egyptian soldiers in the Red Sea, yet complain to YHWH as to the lack of available water to drink. The move from worship to verbal griping is rapid, but YHWH still provides sweet water – via the addition of a stick of wood – for Israel's sustenance. This is also the God who heals.

Note: YHWH is the personal name of God given to Moses

Questions

3. Moses's song is expansive and expositional. By contrast, Miriam's song is very short (*but is it 'sweet', like how the water at Marah becomes?*) What might we make of the differences between the respective songs, and their particular shape/focus?
4. What do you glean from reading the hymns and the Marah episode juxtaposed together? What light does each shed on the other and what insights do you draw as a result?





5. How do you respond to such difficult passages (*and others like them*) as texts of Scripture?

And finally

6. As you reflect on how you explored these questions, which of the Seven Principles helpfully described your discussion? Would you wish to add any other principles to enable us to hear what the Psalms and Exodus are saying to us today in the 21st Century?

Sharing our insights

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Next session's passages: Isaiah 6 & Revelation 22



Session 4

Bible passages – Isaiah 6 & Revelation 22

Introduction

Prophets in Israel were typically 'agin the government', holding the powers-that-be to account. One of the first, Samuel, used his last words to warn about the ways of kings (*see 1 Samuel 12*), and even the nation's most famous king, David, faced the wrath of the Nathan (*see 2 Samuel 8*). These prophets and other 'men of God' like Abijah, Elijah, Elisha, Amos as well as unnamed others had a track record of engaging the 'establishment' of both the kingdoms into which Israel divided after Solomon.

Isaiah is the outstanding exception. A priest as well as a prophet, he became a key supporter of King Hezekiah during the Assyrian crisis around 725BC - the only event told three times in the First Testament (*Isaiah 36-39 and 2 Kings 18.13-20.19 and 2 Chronicles 32*). That Isaiah's initial vision and commissioning took place in the Temple, the seat of royal power, was thus quite unusual. A crucial moment in the ministry of Isaiah of Jerusalem was his prophesying the rescue of the royal city and Temple from the marauding Assyrians (*which raised problems for later prophets - cf Jeremiah 7.4*).

John's vision in Revelation took place at the opposite end of the theological spectrum - not in the Temple but on the small island of Patmos, where he was taking refuge from persecution. And his vision of the new creation is one in which 'no Temple' is found (*Revelation 21:22*)!

These well-known scriptures illuminate the differing nuances of God's use of, and response to, 'sacred places'. Reading them together allows a conversation to begin about our priorities as communities and people of faith in Christ, according to the scriptures.

Background notes: Isaiah 6

"In the year that King Uzziah died" tells us not only of a date (742 BC), but a context. The southern kingdom of Judah had experienced a period of stability under Uzziah /Amaziah, who is recorded as reigning for 52 years (*2 Kings 15.2*). However, given his skin disease in later life, this may have included periods of co-regency with his son Jotham and possibly his grandson Ahaz, whom Isaiah opposed on several fronts as unfaithful to the Lord. The "year that King Uzziah died" thus seems to mark a shift in Judah's standing before God - a time ripe for a prophet to be called out.

Isaiah's 'call' took place in the Temple, and - unlike any previous prophet in Israel - included a vision of God's presence there. "I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, and the hem of his robe filled the Temple": the living God is unimaginable 'bigger' than any human notion of divinity! This holy place, with its three overlapping rooms, was intended to symbolise and celebrate the holiness of God: the three-fold song of the seraphs echoes from this chapter across the scriptures until it is heard again in John's Patmos vision (*Revelation 4:8*) and taken into the Christian eucharist.

Yet Judah and its leaders were betraying God's holiness by their unholy lifestyles - hence the stern message which Isaiah is given to proclaim (*verses 9-13*). As a man of God, Isaiah's experience of this vision leads him to a deep awareness of both his people's and his own unworthiness to remain in God's presence (*the meaning of 'unclean'*). But the Lord is a God who makes whole, who desires to be 'at one' with the people of God, and so Isaiah's lips are touched with a burning coal - not exactly an easy experience! - and he is freed from guilt and his sins are blotted out (*verses 6-7*).



In country Victoria, Australia, Archdeacon Stretch rode hundreds of miles in the mid-19th century to establish churches in scattered settlements - you can tell where he has been because the service register will list as the text, "Isaiah 6". This passage has been used in countless sermons as an appeal for people to respond in like manner - acknowledging unworthiness in the face of God's presence, receiving forgiveness and offering for service.

For Isaiah, however, his call was wider than this. It entailed acknowledgement of a nation's wrongdoing, and the proclamation of a dire message of doom, however they responded. Isaiah's ministry commenced in the Temple, and would lend firm support to Jerusalem, its king and Temple, in the Assyrian crisis. But ultimately Isaiah of Jerusalem stood with the other prophets against the established order when it denigrated "the Holy One", his favourite way of speaking of the Lord.

Questions

1. The opening verses of Isaiah 6 have inspired many songs, from apostolic times onward (cf Revelation 4:8). In Christian eucharists, the 'Ter Sanctus' (*Holy Holy Holy*) has been acclaimed "with angels and archangels, and all the company of heaven" since early times. In what ways does it inspire you to live in the present in the light of God's future?
2. How does Isaiah 6.1-8 speak to you of your relationship to God? How does it speak to others in a group of which you are a part? When the verses that follow are considered, how might the passage speak differently (cf Mark 4:12)?

Background notes: Revelation 22

Endings say a great deal about what a story means - which makes this last chapter of the New Testament and Christian Bible as it has been arranged over the centuries, particularly interesting. A strong prophetic element runs throughout this book, and "blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book" (verse 7).

In John's time, Roman imperial power was turning against the emerging Christian communities - and Revelation as a book is scarcely an endorsement of this status quo. Roman power is symbolized as a beast, a dragon, prostitute Babylon, the great accuser (Satan), full of dread power, yet paradoxically overthrown by the blood of the Lamb and the saints it had sought to devour.

Revelation sets readers' hopes on the ultimate kingdom, when the Lamb of God - the Lion of Judah (see 5:5) - reigns with God on the throne (22:1,3). But this forward-oriented prophetic writing - the 'apocalypse' as it is called in some versions - is no mere escapism, "pie in the sky when you die".

Yes, this closing chapter of the Christian story looks for the healing of the nations (*not just individuals* - verse 3), a time when evil in all its forms will be no more (verses 3, 15 - cf 20:14-15). But it does more: it constitutes a call to live now in the light of the 'blessed hope' of a new creation, since the Lord is making "all things new" (21:5).

Responding to a prophet's call - whether from ancient Israel or the scriptures' final chapter - thus brings future hope into present living. It means unreserved allegiance to the living God alone (22:9),





renouncing all evil (*injustice, sexual immorality, killing, sorcery* - 22:11, 15), living in the light (22:5) and hope of the Lord Jesus, the Alpha/ Omega, the first /last, the beginning /end (22:12- 16), whose promise remains - "Surely I am coming soon!" (22:20).

"Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen!" What a way to end a book - and what challenge to live it!

Questions

3. Revelation 22 is placed as the last chapter the Christian scriptures (*however else books may be arranged*). What do you make of it as 'having the last word' in the Bible? In what ways might it be misused or distorted?
4. Work through Revelation 22 to summarise the various ways in which it presents Jesus - and the opponents of what Jesus is presented as standing for. Is there a tension here? In what ways does this relate to the testimony of other New Testament books?
5. In the light of this pair of passages (*Isaiah 6 and Revelation 22*), what do you think it means to live 'prophetically' in your time and place? How does Christian concern to be 'salt' which preserves society mix with being 'light' which exposes evil and looks for change (*cf Matthew 5:13-16*)?

And finally

6. As you reflect on how you explored these questions, which of the Seven Principles helpfully described your discussion? Would you wish to add any other principles to enable us to hear what the prophecy of Isaiah and John's Revelation are saying to us today in the 21st Century?

Sharing our insights

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Next session's passage: Hebrews 3:7-4:16



Session 5

Bible passage: Hebrews 3:7-4:16

Introduction

The so-called letter to the Hebrews is famously anonymous. Whilst it is commonly linked with Paul, it is very unlikely that he was the author, as it appears to derive from someone who received the gospel second or even third hand (2:3-4). Its audience is also anonymous. They have been described as 'Hebrews' because of the letter's extensive use of the First Testament, and the old/new covenant discourse it sets forth. But the text never explicitly identifies the recipients (*though a throwaway line at the end of the epistle suggests that they may be connected with Rome – see 13:24*).

What Hebrews does offer is a window onto how the Jewish Scriptures were used in the first century, and specifically onto how Jews were using them in trying to make sense of the 'Christ event'. Thus, when considering how the biblical text could or should be used, Hebrews gives us one of the earliest examples in the Jewish-Christian tradition. Furthermore, although commonly called a 'letter', it reads more like a sermon, or rather sermons, on certain key texts which were perhaps significant for the early church – notably Psalms 8, 95 and 110, and Jeremiah 31. As we saw in Session 3, the Psalms provided a major source for the New Testament writers, and they found in the text the raw material or vocabulary for speaking about the advent of the Son (*Hebrews 1:1-4*).

Background notes: Hebrews 3:7-4:16

Within Hebrews, this text is the second of five so-called 'warning passages' addressed to the letter's recipients. There would seem to be a group of believers who are falling away from the community, giving up on meeting together (10:25) and being carried away by strange teachings (13:9). Hebrews issues a call to faithfulness, an exhortation not to give up on following after Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith (12:1-2). He is held up as the paradigm of faithfulness (3:1-6), with Israel's wilderness generation, by contrast, depicted as the embodiment of faithlessness. The later exhortations get harder – cf. 6:4-6 and 10:26 – but even here, the wilderness demise of Israel is held up as a strong warning against disregarding the word of God.

Our passage begins with a quotation of the Greek form of Ps 95 (*an enthronement Psalm*). The first half of the Psalm is a familiar text, the so-called *Jubilate* – "come and let us sing for joy to the Lord". It is a call to worship, and a very positive, inviting one at that. The second half of the Psalm is somewhat different, however; it picks up on Israel's rebellion and disobedience in the wilderness years, and YHWH's consequent action to them. Israel will not enter into the land – they will not enter into God's "rest". Hebrews interprets the Psalm in terms of the narrative of Numbers 13-14 and Deuteronomy 1 – namely the visit of the spies in to the land, and Israel's refusal (*Caleb and Joshua apart*) to take God at his word at Kadesh Barnea. Israel did not respond with faith – and therefore endured forty years of wilderness wanderings. Hebrews therefore sets a fundamental question before its readers – will they be faithful like Jesus (3:1-6) or unfaithful like Israel (3:7-4:11).





Questions

1. What aspects of the Psalm 95 does Hebrews pick up on? What do you make of its interpretation of the Psalm – especially bearing in mind the earlier part of the Psalm (*verses 1-7*)?
2. Hebrews seems to take the situation of Israel in the wilderness, and re-apply it to the context of its readers. Paul does a similar task in 1 Corinthians 10:1-11. What does this imply about how biblical testimony might get used and re-used?
3. Look at 4.6-9 and Hebrews' logic here. What does it say about how Hebrews thinks Scripture works? Who "speaks" Scripture (*cf. 4:3*)? And what does it mean for Scripture to be "spoken"? And what role does David have to play?
4. Hebrews speaks of the word of God being sharper than a two-edged sword (4:12). Why does Hebrews use this 'word of God' language? How does it relate to your own experience of relating to or hearing Scripture?

And finally

5. As you reflect on how you explored these questions, which of the Seven Principles helpfully described your discussion? Would you wish to add any other principles to enable us to hear what Hebrews is saying to us today in the 21st Century?

Sharing our insights

What do you want to share with fellow Anglicans as a result of your study and discussion? A feedback form can be found on the Anglican Communion website at:

<http://www.aco.org/ministry/theological/bible/comments.cfm>



Section 2 – Seven Principles

If we are to engage with Scripture, as Anglicans, mindful of all that the Church has learned, are there principles we can follow in this process? How do we seek to listen to what Scripture says?

The Bible in the Life of the Church project derived the following principles from the themes emerging from Anglican Communion documents, regional research of current Anglican practice and contemporary Anglican hermeneutical insights.

Principle 1: Christ is the living Word of God.

For Christians, every dimension of the Bible in some way points to the living person of Jesus who is the Christ, and to the unlimited, liberating love of God, which is revealed in Christ the Word. As The Windsor Report makes clear in its Hermeneutics section (Section B, Scripture and Interpretation), it is not the words of the Bible that are “the way, the truth and the life”; it is the person of Christ the Word of God, to whom the Bible witnesses. It is in this sense that the Bible is the ‘Word of God’. This means that any adequate interpretation of a biblical text must discern in it the light of God’s will to redeem all humanity in Christ the Word, to go to any lengths to do so, and finally to accomplish what God intends. Christ is the living Word of God to whom the written words bear witness.

The Christian insight is that “God is love” (1 John 4:16) and that God’s love knows no limits (“neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord”, Romans 8:39). The Bible reveals that the love of God in Jesus is the culminating point of its teaching and therefore gives us a uniquely Christian hermeneutic. As the Generous Love document of 2008 says,

... The Bible has primacy in Anglican theological method, in that we seek to be a community living in obedience to Jesus Christ, the eternal Word of God who is revealed through the words of Holy Scripture. In identifying the message of the Bible for the present, the Anglican method brings the insights of tradition and reason to the interpretation of the text in the light of experience ...

The Bible as the revelation of the Love of God in Jesus Christ expresses this love in terms of righteousness and justice.

Principle 2: The Old Testament is the foundational part of Christian Scripture, its First Testament.

The books of the Bible are hugely different in time, culture, genre, place and perspective. The plurality of the Scriptures demonstrates an unfolding revelation of God. The cumulative witness of the Old Testament reveals the character of God and of the faithful life of God’s people and in multiple parts points toward Christ. We understand who Christ is in light of the Old Testament and we read the Old Testament in the light of Christ. Article VII makes this fundamental point: “The Old Testament is not contrary to the New: for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to Mankind by Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and Man, being both God and Man. Wherefore they are not to be heard, which feign that the old Fathers did look only for transitory promises.”



Principle 3: The Bible is to be taken as a whole and has within it great depths of spiritual meaning.

It is the responsibility of the Church to explore the multiple meanings of Scripture. In Exodus 14, the account of the escape of the Israelites from the Egyptians can be read as history. Within the story there is also a moral principle. It calls for the liberation of enslaved peoples and thanksgiving for God's liberating acts. For Christians it points forward to the liberating death of Jesus on the cross which Luke (9:31) describes as his 'exodos' ('way out'). That is at least one aspect of its future fulfilment. The exodus has a spiritual meaning also. It calls us to leave the world of oppression, greed and enslavement, in order to follow the call of God, even when that means venturing forth in hope into an unknown destiny.

Similarly, when reading any passage of the Bible we must consider all relevant biblical material and not take passages in isolation and out of context. Mark 13, for example, speaks about the coming of Christ in the future against the background of the prophetic heritage of symbolic speaking. We can see that those symbols refer not only to an eschatological reality but also to the religious and political context of Israel, the hostile environment of Roman Palestine. In both respects they call us to lead lives of ethical responsibility and hope. The Bible is greater than the sum of its parts and taking it as a whole deepens our understanding of its different parts.

Principle 4: There are many different literary genres in the Bible, which are to be distinguished carefully and consistently.

It is irresponsible and dangerous to interpret texts without attentiveness to literary genre. For example, Jesus' injunction to pluck out your own eye (*Matt 5:29*) if read without recognition of the metaphor is contrary to his actual meaning, that we are to view others accurately and responsibly. While also, Scripture challenges us in many places to address injustice, poverty and oppression with the justice and compassion of God. This is not a metaphor, it is a literal calling.

Another example would be that much of the poetry in Scripture is not so much about 'teaching' but given to us for inspiration or reflection encouraging us to read Scripture devotionally and mystically.

Principle 5: An accurate reading of the Bible is informed, not threatened, by sound scientific understanding: the God who inspires Scripture as a true witness is the same God who created the world.

We see the word of God written in Scripture as a special revelation (John 14:16; John 14:26) pointing to Jesus Christ, the living Word. We also see a general revelation over time (John 16:12-13) in the life of the world around us, even though the world is marred. God's truth is the same in the Bible and all through the world that God has made.

Richard Hooker in Ecclesiastical Laws Book II wrote, "But admit this, and mark, I beseech you, what would follow. God in delivering Scripture to his Church should clean have abrogated amongst them the law of nature; which is an infallible knowledge imprinted in the minds of all the children of men, whereby both general principles for directing of human actions are comprehended, and conclusions derived from them; upon which conclusions groweth in particularity the choice of good and evil in the daily affairs of this life. Admit this, and what shall the Scripture be but a snare and a torment to weak consciences, filling them with infinite perplexities, scrupulosities, doubts insoluble, and extreme



despairs?" viii. 6. Jonathan Edwards, an eighteenth-century theologian, identified true knowledge as "the consistency and agreement of our ideas with the ideas of God...All the arts and sciences, the more they are perfected, the more they issue in divinity, and coincide with it, and appear to be part of it."

For many centuries Christians typically believed with much of the rest of the world that the earth was flat. With the introduction of more advanced astronomy and exploration we discovered the world is a globe floating in what appears to be an expanding universe which has existed for billions of years.

This kind of understanding deepens our insight into the revelation of Scripture itself. For instance, our respectful reading of Genesis can be greatly enhanced by drawing on the findings of science, particularly relating to the origin and development of life and the ongoing interdependence of all creatures.

Principle 6: *The Bible must be seen in the contexts of the world in which it was written and also brought into conversation or confrontation with our worlds in order to discern God's will for us today.*

We each read the Bible in a community of interest and in a particular context. At the same time the Holy Spirit is given to the Church for all times to lead it into all truth. Often this involves a prophetic challenge and confrontation. As we sought to engage within the Bible in the Life of the Church project important contemporary issues facing Anglicans emerged including economic injustice, ecological degradation and the social disenfranchisement of women. A number of passages explored within the project were far from straightforward in the way they addressed these issues. They are all issues that Scriptural texts speak to in challenging ways with which we as a community of faith are called to wrestle.

God is active in history, and God's way of saving grace, through Christ crucified and risen, is an ongoing pilgrimage of hope: "your Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven." The Bible reveals the truth about our journey and the power of the Spirit guides us as we deepen our understanding and let it transform our lives over time.

Principle 7: *We listen to the Scriptures with open hearts and attentive minds accepting their authority for our lives and expecting that we will be transformed and renewed by the continuing work of the Holy Spirit.*

The document, *The Anglican Way: Signposts on a Common Journey*, produced by the Theological Education for the Anglican Communion working party, states:

... In our proclamation and witness to the Word Incarnate we value the tradition of scholarly engagement with the Scriptures from earliest centuries to the present day. We desire to be a true learning community as we live out our faith, looking to one another for wisdom, strength and hope on our journey. We constantly discover that new situations call for fresh expressions of a scripturally informed faith and spiritual life ...

As a paradigm for the way in which the Church wrestles with its Scriptures and tradition we would commend the deliberations of the Council of Jerusalem which in Acts 15 concludes: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28)



In the long-suffering grace of God we believe that God can reveal what we need for our salvation even with our imperfections and limited understanding. This does not depend only on our work of interpretation of the Bible, but on the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit inspiring the people of God in each generation.

Section 3 – Summary of the Themes that emerge

1. Anglicans accord Scripture a central place in the life of the Church.
2. Anglicans value biblical scholarship while acknowledging that Scripture must also be read within the context of the Church's practice in order for us to hear its fullest meaning.
3. Anglicans experience the Word of the living God through the words of Scripture as we participate in liturgy and worship.
4. Anglicans recognise that the application of Scripture to complex issues requires serious study and prayer.
5. Anglicans recognise that there is a healthy and necessary diversity of views on the interpretation of Scripture but that such diversity exists within limits.
6. Anglicans recognise that both the original contexts in which biblical texts were written and the contemporary cultural contexts in which they are heard are important to the way we read Scripture.
7. Anglicans recognise that Scripture 'reads' us as we read the Bible.
8. Anglicans recognise that we hold a great deal in common on these issues with our ecumenical partners.
9. Anglicans recognise that the dynamic interplay between Scripture, reason and tradition constitutes a classic Anglican way of viewing and approaching Scripture.
10. Anglicans recognise that every generation has to approach anew the task of engaging with and interpreting Scripture.

