

2 Timothy 3:10-17**Luke 2:41-52****Introduction**

A father was approached by his small son, who told him proudly, 'I know what the Bible means!' His Father smiled and replied, 'What do you mean, you "know" what the Bible means?' The son replied, 'I *do* know!' 'OK' said his father. 'So, son, what does the Bible mean?' 'That's easy Daddy. It stands for "Basic Information Before Leaving Earth"'.

Well you know I think that isn't a bad working description and, as with any book we read, it is helpful to know what its purpose is: whether it is fact, fiction, history, literature, science, poetry – or some other form of communication.

Although the Bible is the most popular book ever written and more copies of it have been sold than any other in all time there are many people who dismiss it as being unreliable, and irrelevant. That is because they don't understand what its purpose is and they read it as if it was history or science.

The absolute purpose of the Bible is to reveal who God is to the people he created. It is so much more than a book – it is a library: and contains many different forms of writing: story, history, prophecy, poetry, biography and teaching. Its whole purpose is to speak to us and tell us of God and his plans for our lives.

The writer to the Hebrews said this: *"In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son,"*

Paul, writing to Timothy told him, *"All scripture is 'God Breathed'"* which is also translated 'is inspired by God'. I don't believe that this means that God dictated the words to the many different people who wrote the books of the Bible, or that it was always given to them in visions. I do believe that this means that the Holy Spirit inspired them as to what should be written in the same way, as in my experience, when I ask him to guide me in praying for people or speaking to them he gives me the words to say. When you read the Bible the personality and the purpose of the writer comes through clearly and this is certainly not a uniform single piece of literature. God uses individuals to convey his message.

Scripture, which means 'writings', came first as an oral tradition where the stories, songs and prophecies were first passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. 'Well', you might ask, 'doesn't that make it intrinsically unreliable? By no means! In the ancient world, in any community there were those who were entrusted with the story of the people whose job it was to guard it and to pass it on faithfully. Even in the New Testament where the account of Jesus' life and death wasn't committed to paper for

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about thirty years it was written under the scrutiny of those who had been there and who could and would correct any error.

What is important when reading the Bible is to know what sort of writing we are dealing with. If we don't know that we can misunderstand it and dismiss it as untrue. We see this most often in the reading of Genesis, which is not science or history. It is myth or story or allegory. I don't like the word myth because these days it carries connotations of untruth. Allegory is a better word. The account of creation is not scientific fact it is a figurative description of how God created the world and human beings by his intent and power, by his very word. From the very beginning what is being told is God's character, his relationship with the people and world he so lovingly created and his purposes for them. If we think of it as being a scientific account we completely miss the point and with the aid of modern science may completely dismiss it as being of no value. It isn't helpful in teaching us about how our world came into being in a scientific manner. What it does is teach us about the character and personality behind creation. I don't personally believe that the world was created in seven days. But what I do believe is that God could have created it like that if he had wanted to.

One of the other parts of scripture when we need to be clear what sort of writings we are dealing with is the historical books; from Judges, through Samuel, Kings and Chronicles. There is great historical accuracy in them and as archaeologists have excavated Israel and surrounding territories they have found much evidence to back up the historical accounts. Where they might not be considered to be correct is in the accounts of the politics of the day. There is a wealth of Ancient Near Eastern writing that gives accounts of the world it describes and the description is often at odds with what the Bible tells us.

For example there is a king called Omri, who was the father of Ahab, who is described in the first book of Kings as a bad king, someone who did evil in the sight of the Lord and led the people of Israel to worship idols and took them away from following their God.

Contemporary sources, however, paint a picture of a dynamic and powerful figure, and he is thought by modern scholars to have been one of the most important rulers of the northern kingdom. He is known to have conquered Moab, formed an alliance with Tyre, and moved the capital of Israel from Tirzah to Samaria. As king, Omri brought stability following a period of riots and disorder. He also adopted a policy of toleration for the local Canaanite religion in hopes of reducing tensions between the Israelites and local Canaanite tribes, and that policy is why he was condemned by God because he led the people of Israel away from him into pagan worship. From God's perspective the role of the King is to point the people to God and strengthen

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their relationship with him. From a worldly viewpoint the role of a king is to bring prosperity to a country.

When we read the Bible we are reading an account of who God is and of his purposes for the people he created. It is a story of love and passion and anger and determination. Currently our lectionary readings for Morning Prayer are taken from the prophet Hosea, which is one of my favourite Books of the Bible. In it the prophet Hosea is called to marry a prostitute who bears him children yet turns away and abandons him to chase after other lovers whom she thinks will provide for her better than her husband. It is a book that expresses God's love and commitment to the people he created and is filled with sorrow, and love and yearning and tenderness – but also of deep anger of a lover betrayed. The life of the prophet acts out the story of God and his people.

The Old Testament tells the story of God seeking out his people and them turning away and again and again it tells us of the Cycle of rebellion and judgement. Where God makes a covenant relationship with his people who break that relationship and follow other gods. The relationship is broken and God turns away from his people in judgement, they call for help and repent and God rescues them. It also throughout its pages tells us of God's eternal rescue plan and points to the Messiah, the Saviour he will send who will break that cycle and bring his people back to him.

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And it is supremely in, Jesus that God is revealed to us and brings us restoration and healing. And we find that revelation of God in the New Testament

It is interesting as we read the Gospel to see how important the scriptures were to Jesus. He, of course, only had the Old Testament – the law and the prophets but he had clearly studied them and knew them and used them to guide him and to speak to him both of his own ministry and of life in general. In our Gospel reading we see the only account of Jesus as a child when, as a twelve year old boy about to enter adulthood, he accompanies his parents to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. When it is time to leave to return home instead of accompanying them he stays in Jerusalem. And, after three days is found in the Temple, sitting amongst the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. We are told, *"Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers"*.

Even as a young lad Jesus was learning scripture and 'doing his Father's business'. Part of what he would have done when he returned home with his

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parents would have been to attend the synagogue as all Jewish boys did to learn the scriptures and through doing so meet with God and learn his purposes for him. We will say more in later sermons about Jesus's attitude to and use of scripture.

What Paul tells his young colleague Timothy is ¹⁶ *All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,* ¹⁷ *so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.* Paul is about to leave Timothy, his young protégé and is preparing him for the difficulties that lie ahead. He knows that he is going to encounter opposition in his ministry, there will be false teachers and people who will want to undermine and discredit his ministry and he reminds Timothy how, from an early age he has learned the scriptures that in Paul's words *are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.* He wants Timothy, as a man of God, to be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Mahatma Ghandi said this, "You Christians look after a document containing enough dynamite to blow all civilisation to pieces, turn the world upside down, and bring peace to a battle torn planet. But you treat it as though it is nothing more than a piece of literature.

My hope for us, in the four church benefice is that over the next year we will learn to know and love our bibles much better and to learn how to use them to learn more of God and to enable us to live the way he has called us to.

For the next Four weeks there will be a zoom discussion group on Tuesday afternoons where we can meet together to discuss the sermon, ask any questions we have and dig a little deeper into scripture than we can do on a Sunday morning. I will post my sermon, as usual, on the website but will also put it in the calendar section where the details of the 'Introducing the Bible' zoom meetings are. If you would like to join in this meeting and find it difficult to find the details on the website please let me know and I will send you the link and copies of the sermons and questions we will be discussing. If Tuesday afternoons at 2.0pm aren't convenient for you we will record the sessions so you can log in and listen. IF it isn't good for most people we will find a better time so do let me know.

Just to leave you with a thought – some wit said, "Dusty Bibles make for dirty lives!"