

Sermon Holy Trinity Headington Quarry - August 23rd 2009.
Ephesians 6. 10-20 & John 6. 56-69

May I speak in the name of God - who is creating, liberating and sustaining us. Amen

On Friday I was doing the family shopping and bought a new brand of cereal. Let's call it 'comedy muesli' - because on closer reading of the pack, it was clear that it was trying to be funny.

Listen to this...

'Hummingbirds drink flower nectar and flap their wings up to 70 times a second. Which just goes to show that sugary drinks really do make you hyperactive!'

But what really caught my attention was this. The pack claims that this muesli has...

'A whole dawn chorus of flavours..., after a bowlful of this cereal you'll be ready to climb a tree, flap your arms and fly to work!'

But there was a footnote to this claim ...

'Caution - This sentence may contain traces of metaphor. Not to be taken literally.'

I found myself thinking if only our Bibles came ready printed with this health warning, I think the world might be a better place.

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And our two bible readings today, if read literally, straight off the page, would be an uncomfortable read. And I don't mean uncomfortable as in challenging us to lead a better life. Just strange, alien, not really very much help.

Our Gospel reading starts by saying that those who eat the flesh of Jesus and drink his blood will live forever. Sounds very strange unless you are prepared to understand flesh and blood as the bread and wine of the Eucharist and 'eternal life' as something beyond our definitely limited life on earth.

Or take our Ephesians reading. Let's read it straightforwardly...

'Put on the whole armour of God so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.. For our struggle is not against enemies of the flesh...(humans that is)..but against the rulers, against the authorities, against cosmic powers of the present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.'

So, it goes on..

'Take the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one.'

It's strong stuff. And pretty easy to understand at a literal level. Perhaps that's why in many parts of the world, maybe in parts of our own church, this reading is taken at face value - understood to be about withstanding a figure called the devil - one of a whole range of evil powers that are at war with the power of God.

The problem for me in reading this literally is that I don't think the world is actually like that. I don't believe in a supernatural person called the devil - or rulers, authorities and spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places.

But plenty of people do. I've recently been on holiday in Canada. Filling in a couple of hours driving, we tuned in to one of the many 'Christian' radio stations that broadcast across the whole of North America. I listened incredulously for a while whilst the presenter ruminated about whether 'cremation' was unbiblical.

His conclusion? There were references to burial in the Bible but not to cremation. So burial probably ought to be the first choice for a Christian funeral!

He then went on to discuss the recent Channel 4 show 'How do you know God exists?' In which Archbishop Rowan was featured. Needless to say, he did not like ++Rowan's approach one little bit.

He had particular loathing for the Archbishop's ideas about hell. ++Rowan had apparently suggested hell was like being stuck for eternity with your own ego.

'Darn it, read the bible Rowan!' yelled the presenter, 'Hell is real - you go there and you burn.'

Well you get the picture. Listening to him for half an hour or so, I have to say I began to feel like signing our kids up for Richard Dawkins' holiday camps or going on one myself. I certainly felt like his religion and mine were worlds apart.

But, if you take our Epistle and read it literally, you have to admit that it could be said to support his worldview.

So what's wrong with reading the bible literally?
Surely it's the obvious thing to do?

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Well one of the problems with trying to read the Bible literally is that you end up with views of the world which are completely out of step with almost everyone else. In particular, you'll have no place for the findings of science or modern thought. Anything that appears to contradict the Bible, any alternative source of authority must be challenged.

But some people think that's what Christians should be like - turning their back on the corrupting influences of the world and holding fast to the truth of the text. Why should Christians not be literal in reading their holy book? Isn't that showing real commitment and courage?

Well, I don't think so. The fact is that we know from people who have spent their whole lives

studying the Bible in depth - from biblical scholars - that the Bible wasn't handed down by divine dictation - it's *not* the unmediated word of God.

The Bible is a collection of human books written by ordinary human beings more than a thousand (and in some cases several thousand) years ago. The authors were trying their best to tell stories about God from their experience - trying their best to make sense of the world -of their experience of good and evil. But their time was very different to ours and many aspects of life have changed dramatically since then.

Common sense as well as biblical scholarship tells us that to read the Bible as if it were a book written by God so that we can read off our past, present and future 'just like that', is getting something wrong. It's what Rowan Williams calls a category error - thinking the Bible's one sort of thing when it's actually something else.

Some books are written to be read literally - instruction booklets for household gadgets, cookery books, certain kinds of newspaper article. But the Bible's just not that kind of a book.

We shouldn't feel ashamed to be thinking about the Bible like this. The Bible itself tells us that we need to use our brains in seeking after God.

We are told in the Gospels that we must love the Lord our God with all our heart, our mind and our strength - heart, *mind* and strength - not just our guts.

Our Gospels tell us that we must switch on our brains if we're looking to speak of God.

This is nothing new. Particularly in the Church of England, our theology, our understanding of God, has always been based on three things working together - scripture, tradition and reason. *Reason*, alongside scripture and tradition has been the basis of our common life.

When we approach biblical texts we need to use reason in several ways -

- to try to understand the different world that the Bible writers inhabited.
- to understand how best to translate and interpret the biblical texts we have.
- to work out where a particular understanding of the Bible will take you. Towards an outworking of love and justice - towards God? Or away from love and justice and away from God?

We need to approach the Bible critically with our brains (as well as our hearts) tuned in in order for it to become the living word of God to us.

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So having said all that, what can we make of our Ephesians passage today?

The passage uses the image of 'the armour of God' as the best form of attack and defence against the forces of evil. And, whatever we think nowadays, St Paul probably did not mean the references to the devil and powers of darkness to be metaphors.

He and his contemporaries *really* understood the world to work by means of hidden forces and powers working for good or for evil. And before the scientific age it's not hard to see how this might be an attractive explanation.

But for many of us, the findings of science mean that we do not share that worldview. We're left with a situation where, to accommodate our understanding of the way the world is, we have to understand the passage metaphorically. We have to understand phrases like '*cosmic powers of darkness*' or '*spiritual forces of evil*' as word pictures - not as literal descriptions of a cosmic reality - even though it was not meant like that by the original author.

Of course there are other options than a metaphorical reading. We could try to hold on to the intended meaning in opposition to our contemporary worldview as the fundamentalists do. Or we could simply dismiss the text as having any meaning for us now.

But I don't want to dismiss it. Because understanding the passage in metaphorical way can still be helpful to us now - despite the changes that have taken place in the world since the text was written.

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'Stand therefore in the whole armour of God. Put on ...

The belt of truth

The breastplate of righteousness

Shoes for proclaiming the Gospel of peace

The shield of faith

The helmet of salvation

The sword of the spirit - the word of God'

These are the things that will enable us to defend human flourishing and destroy those things that are harmful. Stand therefore and resist the powers of darkness.

But of course we're left with a question. If we do not want to accept the same understanding of evil cosmic powers as St Paul, what *are* the dark forces that operate against the power of God in our own day?

The text now leaves a gap of meaning for us to fill. It invites us to engage in finding that meaning. To ask ourselves 'Is there a group of things which, when we are fully clothed in our faith we are bound to oppose?'

To find an answer we could perhaps look at some of the dominant strands in our culture -
What about

Individualism - seeing human well being simply in terms of the individual person;

Consumerism - seeing our well being as a matter of what we consume;

Materialism - defining the world in terms only of the things we can name and quantify;

Or nihilism - the belief that there is no ultimate point in things - no God?

The way those cultural forces are present yet intangible, is perhaps not unlike Paul's cosmic powers. They are forces which can threaten human flourishing - yet are very hard to pin down and

tackle individually. They may indeed be forces with which we have to battle armed with our Christian faith.

But what is important is that the hole in the meaning of our text, left by the change in our understanding of the world, leaves us with a question not an answer. Each of us can wonder - 'What are the forces of darkness that lead me away from God that I need to defend against?' and 'How can my Christian discipleship help me get the better of these temptations?'

So a metaphorical reading of the Bible can be a richer reading - allowing the readers to engage with the text and find meaning that fits their own lives.

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For many people here none of this will be at all surprising or new. We take it for granted. We wouldn't dream of trying to read the Bible literally. We know that it would be futile, impoverishing the text, stripping away layers of meaning, reducing it to a sort of instruction manual for humanity.

But in the church at large, people who choose to read the Bible literally are becoming extremely powerful. In the US the power of the religious right in politics is enormous.

We know how it impacts on women needing abortions - even threatening the lives of doctors who perform the surgery. How it impacts on scientific research - particularly the use of stem cells. How Creationism (wrongly understanding Genesis to give an historical account of creation) is gaining in influence and interfering with the teaching of Biology in schools.

And we need to be aware that these international influences are having a huge impact on the Anglican Communion. Because the divisions around homosexuality and the ministry of women really go much deeper than sexuality and gender which lie on the surface of the current disagreements.

They are really about –
how we should read the Bible and
how we are to understand our religious traditions.

Are they both set in stone, to be guarded and interpreted by religious authorities?
Or are can we use our reflections on human experience, our reason, to refresh our understanding of the Bible and church tradition so we can bring the Gospel message afresh to this generation?

Many fear that the Covenant being proposed to try to hold the Anglican Communion together will leave all but religious conservatives as second class citizens. So the way we choose to approach our theology, the way we balance *reason* alongside scripture and tradition is a hugely important issue for us as a church.

We need to be honest and clear about the place of reason in our theology and be proud of the way of being Christian disciples that it allows.

And we need to be equipped, verbally armed, to defend ourselves against the bullying voices of the fundamentalists, who like things much too neat and simple, if we care about the Gospel of Christ and the future of our Church.

Amen