

One might charitably say of man in one of my former parishes that he “talked in riddles”. Being less charitable, that he never made any sense at all. He’d make very random, incomprehensible, quite bizarre contributions to parish council meetings, during which sideways glances were frequently exchanged between others present. I imagine that, at times, the disciples too exchanged sideways glances while Jesus was teaching, as the Gospels themselves reveal that even Jesus’s close friends struggled to make sense of Jesus and his teaching.

So, why did Jesus teach with parables? Well, they are actually an effective form of communication. Parables expect more of their audience than passive listening. They draw the audience into their scenario, playing on human curiosity and love of stories, inviting identification with their characters and inviting speculation as to what the characters represent: who represents humanity, or God in this story, who might I be... Making effective use of symbolism to impart ideas and concepts without resort to narrow, fixed meaning, they are thought provoking, and stimulate contemplation and reflection. Easily remembered, they may linger in the hearer’s thoughts.

Usually parables are open to interpretation, not so freely as to mean anything, but within the contexts of their own logic, the prevailing culture, universal norms, and Jesus’s ministry. Providing Jesus’s own explanation, today’s parable is unusual. Through Jesus’s explanation of the Parable of the Sower, we learn that the Scriptures come to life within us through faith. Without the eyes of faith, much of the Bible seems implausible, inconsistent and irrelevant, is easily sneered at and ridiculed, or proved inaccurate or outrageous. Case in point, the Davis School District in Utah which recently banned the Bible on the basis of its ‘vulgarity and violence’. (Shakespeare, watch out!)

From the perspective of faith, recognising in Jesus the truth about God and humanity, our approach shifts. Faith cultivates the right conditions within us to be receptive to the Scriptures, understanding them to constitute an expansive narrative relating to us the ways in which women and men, although mainly men, have thought about, experienced and responded to God, have been inspired and called by God, how humans have ‘groped around for God’, as Elaine Farmer recently put it, and how God reaches into human history, ultimately, most fully and conclusively in the life of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps when Christians hear this parable, there’s a temptation to feel smug, that we’re the good soil in which the seed has germinated and flourishes. However, many of us with faith could still do more to cultivate the soils of our inner lives to become more receptive of the Word. Too many Christians don’t read, let alone really study the Scriptures. Biblical illiteracy is high. And by that I mean not only being familiar with the Bible, but also having a working knowledge of how to engage with it beyond the literal surface, and developing a Biblical spirituality, through which one may read, mark and inwardly digest the Scriptures, to use the words of a BCP collect of Archbishop Cranmer, so that the seed of the Word finds nourishment in good soil, not falling on a path, rocky ground or being choked by thorns. Otherwise, Christians can find themselves mishandling the Scriptures.

Take for example Christian fundamentalism. Fundamentalists frequently self-describe as Bible-believing Christians. It’s a term I loathe. I’m not a Bible-believing Christian. I’m a God believing Christian. I respect and honour the Scriptures, I see them as a gift of God to the Church. I take them seriously. But the Bible is not the object of my faith. God is. This Bible-believing stuff sometimes seems no less idolatrous or

superstitious than many of the excesses of the mediaeval church that the Protestant Reformers sought to reform. In many quarters of contemporary Protestantism the Bible is treated as some sort of magical text that is beyond scrutiny, which speaks directly and clearly, in an unfiltered way to people, speaking for itself without need of interpretation, analysis or contextualisation.

Fundamentalism's appeal is unsurprising; offering the low-hanging fruit of over-simplified, clear-cut, black and white, you're in or you're out, heaven or hell, dualistic and simplistic theology, an easy to work with, no It's the theological counterpart to populist politics.

The verbal plenary view of the inspiration of the Scriptures renders Biblical authors as mere scribes or secretaries recording divine dictation, punching out the text like a teleprinter or psychographic spiritualist medium performing automated writing. The appeal being, if this is how one thinks the Bible happened, one is spared the trouble of deep thinking, wrestling with the texts and trying to reconcile them with what we know of God through Jesus and what we know of the world. It's take it or leave, with little interest in coming to terms with contradictions and, in particular historical and scientific, errors in the texts.

Citing chapter and verse Biblical references as the final word in discussion or debate – the 'because it says so' answer – fundamentalists display an impressive capacity to quote from the Bible (putting many of us to shame). Trouble is, the quotes often are highly selective and out of context can fly in the face of the manifest tenor of the Scriptures filtered through the nature of Christ and his revelation of divine love. Rather than providing a direct line between God and the Bible reader, this

(mis)use of Scripture can in fact obstruct reception of the word of God, through facile literalism, oversimplification and out of context use misapplication of texts. At its worst this can result in misuses of Scripture that weaponize it as a licence for oppression, victimisation, control, coercion, abuse or as a self-serving tool: thorns choking out the word of God.

Fundamentalism's commitment to the literal reading of the Bible and its inerrancy, for instance insisting on a literal 6 day creation a few thousand years ago, the historicity of Noah's Ark and the stories of the patriarchs, leaves it in denial of the knowledge base and insights of science, history, anthropology and philosophy. Consider for example the response of some fundamentalists when challenged to reconcile the existence of millions of years old dinosaur bones and fossils with their creationist beliefs: "the devil placed the dinosaur bones and fossils to deceive us" or "God planted the bones of these fake animals to test our faith." Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, states, 'Narratives that may not be exact history can still be exact theology because they represent a long-term deposit from reflection on how God has been encountered over many centuries. It's a very modern anxiety that everything in Scripture should be what we might now think of as 'exact' reporting.'

Consider doomsday preppers, Zionists and others whose literal reading of the Book of Revelation makes it for them a timetable and schedule of works for the "end times". They would probably find themselves relieved of a lot of anxiety through the most basic study of apocalyptic literature in the Maccabean and early Christian eras. Not to mention the confusion and misdirection that may come from a failure to recognise and distinguish between the different genres of the Scriptures.

We see this fundamentalist approach to Scripture on the march in the Anglican Communion among those involved with the GAFCON pressure group as it seeks to hold the Communion to ransom through an insistence on a narrow interpretation of Scripture, pursuing its 'take no prisoners' puritan ideological crusade. Fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals, like the Sydney Anglicans, double down on a narrow, fixed interpretation of the Scriptures particularly concerning the status and roles of women, issues of human sexuality, and salvation; evincing an arrogant certainty about what is acceptable in terms of Christian morality, who gets into heaven and who's hell-bound, through their selective and inflexible use of Scripture in pursuit of a puritanical ideology which they seek to force upon others. Rowan Williams says that 'We Christians are very reluctant sometimes to leave things to God to sort out. We have often a vague feeling that God hasn't read the proper books. And sometimes we feel rather protective towards him and make sure that he knows the right policy.' This certainly is reflected in the approach of many to the Bible, manipulating it to justifying their pre-formed position or shoring up their own particular theological or ideological position, instead of listening for what God is saying through the Scriptures and allowing our interpretations to be formed by that live discernment.

So-called Bible-believing Christians frequently accuse mainstream and liberal Christians of not being true to the Bible and falling into error because we have turned away from the Bible by questioning it and challenging long-held assumptions and interpretations in light of different fields of human knowledge. I utterly reject this claim. How is taking the Bible seriously, studying and seeking to analyse and interpret it with intelligence and intellectual and spiritual honesty turning away from the Bible?

Instead, I submit that to read the Bible from any theological or ideological position that is inflexible and closed akin to a jury giving a verdict at the beginning of a trial before any evidence is adduced. It's facile to pick and choose verses throughout the Bible in isolation to support almost any stance, overlooking inconvenient passages. But that's intellectually and spiritually lazy and dishonest. How different it is to stand before the Scriptures with humility, acknowledge that our theological perspective is the only valid one, our response the correct one, and that not everything can be dragged out of the shades of grey into the black or white corners.

So how might we engage with the Bible in a comprehensive, life-giving manner? In some respects, it's like getting to know someone, shifting from acquaintanceship to friendship or intimacy. To be more than merely acquainted with the Scriptures at the literal level, and for them to draw us to a closer knowledge of the nature of God and the kingdom, we need to scratch the surface, looking deep, with understanding and openness, spending time with them, seeing them within their socio-cultural contexts, and handling them prayerfully. Also, being open to receiving the gifts of intellect and wisdom of those with expertise in theology, Biblical texts, Judeo and Greco-Roman culture: even those with different perspectives to ours. Like engaging with a parable, this asks us to listen, to notice, to pay attention so that we may be formed by the word. Most importantly our engagement with the Scriptures is enlivened by knowing Jesus, being open to the ongoing cultivation that comes to us through Word and Sacrament, through life in the body of Christ, through prayer, and the action of the Holy Spirit within us, which filters our reading of the Scriptures not by our own desires and prejudices but by what we know of God through Christ. None of this is novel. Regrettably, it still needs saying.

This comprehensive approach to the Bible helps us cultivate good soil so that we can receive the Scriptures as the great gift that they are: a wondrous synthesis of myths, laws, history, poetry, liturgical texts, allegory, prophecy, wisdom literature, apocalypse, gospels and epistles which invite us to explore the mysteries of the nature of God, what it is to be fully human, and what it means to find life in the kingdom.