04 The Bible in worship

Readings: Isaiah 45:18-22; II Timothy 3:14 - 4: 5; St John 5:36b – 42
Psalm 138 (read antiphonally)

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

For the past three Sundays we have thought about the human faculty of worship, and about the God we worship. Now we move on to the means by which we worship, the equipment we are given and the structure of our services – all, as I said at the beginning of this series, with a view to making fuller use of the facilities within this building when our alterations are completed.

And the proper starting point for this must be the Bible. Not because it comes first in our Sunday morning Order of Worship, which it doesn't, but because it is the most basic piece of equipment we are given in our search for the knowledge of God, and it is the Bible which must govern every other thing that happens here. The Church of Scotland has always been uncompromising about that. Doctrines, practices, traditions that cannot be reconciled with Scripture, have no place in a Reformed Church; for the men who shaped the Kirk as we now know it were emphatic that the Word of God, revealed in Scripture, must be the supreme rule of the Church's faith and life. The controlling role of Scripture in the liturgy is not confined to that section of the service that is headed "The Word of God"; it extends to every part of what we do here and, if we are truly being "the Church" at all, it extends far beyond our Sunday mornings, shaping the working life, the attitudes, the stewardship, the wholeness of the communities in which we live.

For the least exciting understanding of the Bible is to see it as "a book". It's "a book" – a compilation of paper and ink, boards and glue – in the same way that a symphony can be a CD, worthless till we are caught up by what it is the means of conveying. The Bible is not even a teaching manual, from which we can learn one lesson every week until we have absorbed the lot. Any theologian could produce a far more systematic and consistent account of what Christian faith is all about. What we think of as "a book" is a compendium of hugely varied writing, composed over some 1200 years, and incorporating much material that is even more wide-ranging. There is history, doctrine, ethics, poetry and drama, fiction and biography and private prayers and correspondence. There is truth conveyed through happenings and there is truth conveyed through metaphor and symbol. There is some material that is ugly, and far more that is beautiful. One thing all the books in this amazing library do have in common is that not one author had any notion he was writing Holy Scripture. Every part was written for specific situations and addressed to particular needs. The contents of the Old Testament were not decided until roughly one hundred years before Jesus was born. The contents of the New were not fixed by the Christian Church until the 4th century AD.

Yet it's from this rich and constantly productive quarry that all knowledge of God the Creator has come; and within the kaleidoscope of literature it offers there is shape, a theme, a story, culminating in the life and death and rising of God's Son. The Bible is not in the deepest sense "the word of God". That title belongs more properly to Christ, who was the Word incarnate; but Scripture is an indispensable witness to the living Word, and everything that happens in our worship should be capable of being related back in some way to the record of God's unique revelation to our world.

This doesn't mean that services should be just strings of biblical quotations. Jesus warned the Pharisees that spouting chunks of Scripture wasn't any guarantee of understanding or of faithfulness. In an age when the Bible doesn't seem to be read much in people's homes, and when very little of it is absorbed in day schools in the way it was even one generation back, it seems to me important that we read as comprehensively as possible in church. At main morning services, we follow the traditional custom of three readings: Old Testament, Epistle, Gospel; and I would be very loath to depart from such a pattern. When it's based thematically on a lectionary, as our selection normally is, it helps us to perceive the continuity, and sometimes the contrast, between the two Testaments; and it means that over a two-year cycle [*At the time of writing, the Church of Scotland followed its own two year cycle but now adheres to the three-year Revised Common Lectionary (ed.)*] that we read more than 300 passages – which is by no means exhaustive, but it does ensure that fundamental topics and events and stories aren't left out. But "knowing the Bible" isn't the only thing that matters. Our Reformers were insistent that there is nothing magical about the text itself; indeed it can be thoroughly misleading – any book like Revelation can give rise to ludicrous interpretations. The Bible has to be read in the context and the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Somehow, language, thought forms, culture patterns, world views dating from 2000 years ago and more, have to be de-coded, grappled with, examined and applied until some engagement is established, some point of contact between then and now. Insights coming to us from an ancient, primitive and largely rural people who believed the world was flat, with heaven up above and hell below, must be applied to modern cities and to new technology and possibilities.

Truth spoken by an unmarried village joiner who never travelled further than from Edinburgh to Carlisle must be related now to the situation of engaged couples, patients with cancer and AIDS, geriatrics, jet-setting business men and women, adolescents seeking to make sense of life. Mythological accounts of how the world was made must govern how we tackle the greenhouse effect. Inconsistent accounts of eye witnesses who saw the risen Christ are still the key to how we cope with death when all our modern medicine is defeated.

Perhaps it is a good thing that the Bible is not laid out as a neat and tidy system; because then if it was tailor-made for one specific generation it would not meet the needs of the next. It is better that each chisels from its inexhaustible resources the perspectives and the angles from which God confronts us now. The task of projecting the truths of the past on to the challenges and needs of the present moment has belonged by tradition solely to the ordained preachers of the Church. Now we are more aware that other members may bring insights deeper than the preacher's on particular concerns. Our tradition after all was shaped in days when ministers were often the best educated people in their parishes – and this has long since changed. So now, although the minister still has responsibility for all that happens in church worship, the General Assembly has removed the former law restricting those who may expound the Word in worship. Maybe in the future we can hear more voices from our lectern and our pulpit, and provide an opportunity sometimes for discussion of what has been preached – so that the accumulated wisdom and experience of members can be shared.

Between us, we who gather regularly here on Sundays have at a rough guess clocked up something like 10,000 years of Christian discipleship – drawing nourishment and guidance from a host of different facets of this book. Yet most of us, I am sure, are very much aware that there is far more in it than we've yet discovered. At the same time, most of us have learned enough to feel that those who have never been exposed to what the Bible offers have missed out on something very fundamental.

So, whatever happens in this building in the future, in the form of concerts, drama, visitor facilities, mid-week events – we won't be doing our distinctive thing as Jesus' Church unless the Scriptures remain central to our worship and our witness. And the Scriptures will not be being rightly used unless people are being helped to think, and wonder, and then pray, and make decisions, then move into where the light is and direct their lives accordingly. For our needs and doubts and fears and temptations and bewilderments are all in there already, waiting for us to identify with them. So, mercifully, is God's answer – also waiting for us to identify. The central role of Holy Scripture in the Church's worship is to trigger and then deepen faith. The fruit of that task isn't just a better knowledge of the Bible's contents, although that's important. The real fruit is renewed vision, altered lives and, by extension, a more just and hopeful world.

To the God whose providence has given us the gift of Scripture, to the Son the living Word of God who gave himself for us, and to the Spirit who relates the present to the past and brings the written word to life, be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Rev David M Beckett