

Blandford Forum - Sunday 2 September 2007

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"The Bible ... God's Love Letter "

John 1:1-14, 2 Timothy 3:14-17

One of my favourite films of all time is "Raiders of the Lost Ark". A good old-fashioned yarn about an archaeologist who has a race with the Nazis to find the Ark of the Covenant the box that contained the Ten Commandments, that is believed to have been lost some time during the exile in Babylon. The film is set in the thirties and everyone involved in the chase believes that the Ark contains magical qualities and that those can somehow be used as a means of power in this world. At one point, someone says that the box is a "transmitter, a means of talking to and hearing from God Himself" And the film concludes with all the special effects a 1981 film could muster with the destruction of those who sought the Ark for their own ends, as we witness the realisation that God is far beyond such limitations. A very silly, theologically highly dodgy, but great fun film. But it expresses the desire of people throughout history who have wanted to make contact with God. And more than that it describes what happens when people try to make contact with God for their own ends.

Our belief as Christians is that we have not tried to find some magical transmitter to talk to God but that he has talked to us face to face in Jesus Christ. And the basis for that understanding is not from tape recordings or even transcripts of conversations in a dusty Israel two thousand years ago - No, our basis for believing that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Saviour of the World comes from our belief that this book is the Word of God.

Not a magical book in the sense that quoting words from it will act as spells like some spiritual Harry Potter text book, neither as some kind of loud speaker where God's booming voice is heard. No, our belief is that the Bible is a vehicle whereby God communicates to us through the work of the Holy Spirit. Let me unpack those last few statements: **The Bible is not a magical book.** If it were, and the mere utterance of a few verses would instantly bring about supernatural occurrences every time they were uttered then people would be using it for their own ends. Indeed, we get the words "Hocus Pocus" from a medieval belief that the Bible was some kind of magical book. "Hocus Pocus" comes from the Latin Mass the moment when the Priest uttered the words "Hic Est Meus Corpus" "This is my body". The fact that the words were uttered in Latin made people think there must be some magical property.

Equally, **if the Bible were a loudspeaker** with the booming voice of God then people would be hit with the power of God every single time they heard it read. Both of these ideas are patently untrue. No, as I said, our belief is that the Bible is a vehicle whereby God communicates to us through the work of the Holy Spirit. It is a love letter - and a powerful one at that. **The words have a power, God speaks clearly, but only through the work of the Holy Spirit.** At the start of our service we heard again those incredible words of John that we hear each Christmas as he began his Gospel with an attempt to describe the most incredible events that the world has ever seen. The point in history where God became a man. And John tried to explain this by using an expression which described Jesus: "The Word"

John 1:1 *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* and later on in John 1:14 *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

We have talked of the desire of people throughout history to make contact with God and to hear him speak. The writer to the Hebrews said this: Hebrews 1:1 ***In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son*** John is joining with the writer to the Hebrews in saying that God has spoken through the prophets and now has spoken directly through Jesus himself.

Over the next year we are going to be looking at the subject of the Bible as a whole - the Big Picture behind the Love Letter: what it means in real terms.

There is, I think, sometimes a problem with people believing that once they have become a Christian once they have asked to Jesus to be their Saviour and Lord that ***that*** is somehow “it”. They are “there”. When those first disciples left their nets and toddled off down the beach after Jesus that was not “it”. It was the start of a three year training course an apprenticeship which, in one sense never ended. They went on learning, they went on listening to Jesus for the rest of their lives. Even as they faced persecution and death they still needed to hear from God. Becoming Disciples is a life long apprenticeship and there is sometimes a temptation to regard the Bible as the course handbook - to be picked up and read when there is a problem to be solved.

"So What is the Bible ..?"

"So What is the Bible and what does it claim to be?" And the simple answer is this "The Bible Claims to be the Word of God" Now with all claims there are two things that need to be done: One is to unpack the claim and find out what it is really saying and the other is to weigh the Claim up and find out if it is true.

So what do we mean by saying that the Bible is the Word of God? I thought Jesus was the Word of God? We have talked about becoming disciples. We have talked about Jesus being the Word of God and speaking to us face to face with the words recorded in Scripture, just as words of prophecy messages from God himself are also recorded in the Bible, as the writer to the Hebrews said. In other words: The Bible is claiming to be a vehicle through which the Holy Spirit speaks to us. In other words, the Bible is a means rather than an end. God spoke directly to people through the prophets and through Jesus himself. We believe that God still does speak through those who seek to try and understand what the Bible is saying to a particular group of people in sermons such as this and that God also speaks through those who have a Gift of Prophecy - a Spiritual Gift whereby God speaks words of encouragement and challenge. The words that are claimed to be Prophecy need to be tested and so we can do this by seeing whether they are consistent with what God has said before and so if we claim that the Bible contains words that we believe are from God then we can weigh prophecies against what the Bible says and see if they are consistent.

In our reading from 2 Timothy, we heard these words: 2 Timothy 3:16 ***All Scripture is God-breathed***. The word “breathed” is the same word as “breath” - the breath that God breathed into Adam in Genesis, the same word as Holy Spirit that “inspired” the Prophets, the breath that gave them the words that so often began with “Thus says the Lord”. The claim that the Bible makes for itself is that God speaks through it because the people writing it were inspired, were guided by the Holy Spirit to write the words.

Now there are one or two things we have to say at this point: It comes as a total surprise to some that the original Bible was not written in English. It also comes as a surprise to some that the King James version is no better a translation than the NIV. Scholars are constantly trying to get close to the original text and to get close to understanding the

right translation of the original text. That takes us back to the Bible as a magical book: It simply can't be because we do not have 100% of the original text.

There are those who claim that there are errors in the Bible. If the Bible claims to be the Word of God to be inspired by the Holy Spirit then we must be clear what we mean about errors.

The four Gospel writers all told the story of Jesus but in different ways. Luke tells the story of the enormous catch of Fish in chapter 5 before the calling of the first Disciples. John tells the story in chapter 21 after the Resurrection. An error? No! They are telling their story in exactly the same way that the Beirut hostages of the 1980s told their stories: John McCarthy as a Journalist - Brian Keenan as a Poet - Terry Waite as a Theologian. All very different books with the same events occasionally recorded in a different order.

In other words the Bible doesn't claim to be a neat book with everything carefully ordered and beautifully categorised. It reflects the hand of the dozens of writers writing through the varying styles of 1500 years or more. But what it does claim is a consistency. That whilst the understanding of God in the minds of the writers might develop throughout the Bible, the message of God is consistent throughout.

Our first question was that If the Bible claims to be the Word of God, what does that mean? Then the second question is **does the claim add up?** In a sense, that question is easier to answer. How did Jesus respond to the Temptation in Matthew 4? By quoting the Old Testament as a source of authority. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus repeatedly refers back to the Old Testament as the authority for what he is doing. In other words, Jesus regarded the Old Testament as having an authority, as did Paul in 2 Timothy 3 and, therefore, the early church after due consideration accepted what we call the canon of Scripture the Old and New Testament as the same. And over the 2000 years since it was written it has retained that consistency. God has spoken through it, time and time again, day by day by day and it is still understood to be the primary vehicle through which God speaks to this generation. As Paul encouraged Timothy - he reminded him of the ways that God had spoken to Timothy: 2 Timothy 3:14 ***But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*** Timothy has heard God speak through people and through his Bible our Old Testament. Paul wants Timothy to know of the importance of the authority this carries Verse 16: ***All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*** The Bible claims to be the Word of God a means by which God can speak. Its purpose is clear: to enable us to hear God speak so that we can be equipped for the work God has for us. The implication is clear: If we fail to accept the claims the Bible makes for itself, we doubt God and we cloud our ability to hear Him speak. If we accept the claims that the Bible makes then we have no excuse not to have it as the primary source of our understanding of our faith.

Let's pray.