

UPDATING THE MAP

10 ESSAYS ON ENGAGING WITH THE BIBLE TODAY

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INTRODUCTION

Many assumptions are made about the Bible, even by those who are also asking quite radical questions about both God and the Church. Many of them don't stand up too well to what we now know to be true about its origins. Many believers who hear it read week by week, or who read it for themselves, show little or no interest in what the Bible is or where it came from, content only to quote it (in English) as if that's the end of the matter. That is no longer intellectually sustainable.

My main emphasis in these essays, given my understanding of religion as an individual and corporate human activity just like any other, will be on understanding the Bible as arising directly from *human* experience, not from outside or beyond it. In the shelf-full of very different books that it actually is, it contains a variety of events, themes and styles of material that may help us to look again at our contemporary lives as the original writers looked at theirs. It is not a special class of 'Divine' text quite unlike any other.

If you approach the Bible like that, more as a series of stepping stones than as defining a pre-determined path, does it enable us to find a new way to go? Can we use it to create a new map for a new spiritual journey? A map that recognises the obvious fact that we have travelled well beyond the insights of our ancient forebears and now look at life very differently. Just as they would all have said that the earth was flat, or that the sun went round it, we now live with a modern 'world-view' in the light of all the things we have discovered since. That must make us question where they had reached by then, but maybe the stones still indicate the general direction. So, can I usefully negotiate the spaces between them, and without getting my feet too wet in the process? Let's see what happens.

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1 MYTHS

The Bible begins with a whole series of 'myths', or legends. Although the stories are about what was supposed to have happened at the very beginning of recorded human history, and the earliest datable events would have been around 1500BCE, they were not collected together until about 500BCE as part of the Torah. This was a climax to the process of returning the nation of Judah back to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. This was when they needed a history and an identity and is when the 'Old Testament' as we know it starts to become a reality.

For centuries the first five books were attributed directly to Moses, but that is much more of a statement about their genre and significance than about their actual authorship. Moses was seen as the law-giver; the person who saved the nation from slavery in Egypt and set it on its way to the promised land. Moses is a legend, an icon, not a writer. If you'd like an author, or more accurately, an editor of a variety of material from a range of different sources, the strongest candidate is Ezra. He was the civil servant/priest sent by the Persian king Cyrus to help with the rebuilding of the nation and its religious life after the exile a kind of Ambassador for Jewish Affairs, part of a remarkably enlightened approach to empire-building.

While the elite had been away, standards had inevitably lapsed. The spiritual and political leaders needed to unite the people and help them to re-establish their sense of community. So, like Baldrick in *Blackadder IV*, 'How did it all start?' was an obvious question to ask. But this would be like us re-telling the stories of King Arthur today just as they looked back to Abraham etc. What could be known for certain would obviously be extremely limited and of course there were no original documents available dating back anything like that far.

We usually have a problem with the word 'myth' in that it is immediately seen as suggesting there is no truth in it. I have used the term almost in that way in my educational writing when I talk about the 'Myth of Truancy'. I mean that many of the statements made about the issue are not correct, but also that a 'mythology' has grown up which allows certain assumptions to be left virtually unchallenged.

When I use 'myth' in a religious context, I don't mean that. It means a statement that might not be literally true, or factually accurate in a historical or scientific sense, but which nonetheless contains a truth. So when the writers of one of the stories of creation, (not the oldest one), said that the world was created in 6 'days', they didn't ever mean 6 periods of 24 hours. How could they have done? Days are defined by the rotation of the earth relative to the sun; it rises and it sets each day. But according to the story, there was light (from where?) on day 1, but there was no sun, and therefore no days, until day 4. It can't be read literally or it

becomes nonsense. The rainbow is an entirely natural phenomenon, but the writers gave it a deeper significance as all about a God. We still do the same today, but the meaning we give it has changed. Now it's all about community, diversity and inclusion. The actual scientific reason for a rainbow itself is, however, just the same as it always was.

This is why there is no real conflict with Darwin; it's a different kind of truth. 'Creationism' has absolutely no scientific integrity, but that doesn't necessarily mean that the whole story is rubbish. It is clearly true that the world as we know it came about gradually and in a generally integrated way. The compilers of the myth meant periods of time 'like days'; using an image from what they knew of the regular rhythm of life. We too use similes and metaphors in a similar way to describe things. 'Money (or love) makes the world go round'. No they don't – not literally at any rate. But we can understand the sense of what both are saying. The supporters of my favourite football team regularly sing that they are 'by far the greatest team the world has ever seen'. Obviously not factually true, but still true for them.

The early Genesis myths were designed to explain and to reinforce key elements of national and religious life, not to describe the busiest week in history. The world had order and structure, underpinned, for them, by the myth of a single creator God in contrast to the polytheistic chaos and maverick deities that were commonplace elsewhere. You can apply the same kind of analysis to all the early tales. They seek to explain both the way things are and how they could be.

The story of Adam and Eve is not therefore about two actual people, and we now know our human origins lie in Southern Africa not in the Middle-East, though that was an excellent candidate at the time. The names are generic titles, not those of individuals. It's a myth about a fundamental aspect of human nature, the meaning of which we will come back to later. And so on with Cain, Abel, Noah, the Tower of Babel etc. The writers are interested in the significance of what was happening in ancient days; they just don't describe it like a newspaper.

Myth in the life of Jesus of Nazareth is rather more controversial. In the 1970s some theologians tried to get the Church to think of the Incarnation – the idea that God became human - as a myth. Again not as untrue, but also not a statement of literal fact. If God did 'become man' in Jesus, (whatever that means), did it necessarily require his mother to be a virgin for it to happen, or was that just a way to try and explain it which we can now do without? There is no evidence that Isaiah 7 v.14 is actually about Mary, or about any particular biological virgin; it's all a later interpretation, not helped by issues of poor translation between Hebrew, Greek and Latin.

Similarly, even if it were proved that human bones found in a tomb outside Jerusalem were definitely those of Jesus, would that necessarily mean that he is not 'alive' to those who believe in him? I wouldn't say so.

As is evident in the story, an empty tomb did not prove it; would an intact tomb therefore disprove it? The resurrection is a myth; but that is not saying the idea necessarily has no metaphorical or underlying truth. The writers were trying to express the inexpressible: a sense that Jesus was still with them, despite having died.

These are not the easiest ideas for believers to handle, and may appear to undermine the trustworthiness of the Bible. But the truth being communicated is not necessarily the same as the way in which it is being done. Myths open us up to deeper meanings below the surface. So what 'secular myths' might we still need, given that this use of unifying themes is a helpful way of speaking about ourselves? I don't mean only the big world-shattering events but also the day-to-day sources of collective meaning that we can use to celebrate our humanity. What offers us a framework for our individual and corporate lives, granted that the Christian religion no longer does that for most of us?

Nationhood is clearly still one, though that can divide as well as unite and is easily exploited. A sense of local community or membership of an organisation would be other examples, binding us together in a common identity. Thousands of grown men and women have applauded or stood in silence, and many have even wept, in tribute to a popular football manager or player who has died, but who nearly all of them had never actually met. The 'Black Lives Matter' solidarity movement is another example. We are much less embarrassed about showing our feelings in public than we used to be.

As with the gratitude shown to NHS staff and acts of remembrance or fund-raising during the Covid pandemic, these events are only partly about the individuals concerned; it's not that they were perfect or that their deaths are any more sad than any other. But there are times when we want to stand up for something and a person or cause take on a greater or symbolic meaning. Sporting events like the Olympics, even soaps and serials on TV or things like 'Children in Need' provide us with the equivalent of myths which strengthen our modern individual and corporate identity. If we're talking about it the next day, it has already become something of a myth for us. Ordinary people with no obvious reason to do so, suddenly feel involved and want to do something in response. We discover a personal meaning within a much bigger event.

There is a risk here; we must be careful not to lapse into mere sentimentality or jingoistic flag-waving. But such shared events, and the human responses they evoke, may enable us to speak of something deeper than we often manage in our everyday lives. In particular, they can help us to find a greater sense of our shared humanity. The ancient writers needed a God to do that. I don't think we do; but we still need to find whatever it is that binds us together in making some sense of it all. Every life experience can become a milestone on the journey, or the first

of my 'stepping stones; a marker that speaks of something greater and points us forward.

Perhaps our greatest weakness is triviality; lives that are filled with nothing of any true or lasting significance. One function of religion, from ancient times, has been to raise our eyes 'heavenward'; to give our human experience a new dimension by confronting us with something or Someone greater. That metaphor no longer works for large numbers of us, but perhaps treating everything that happens as a potential source of a deeper truth within, might just help to keep our sense of adventure and discovery alive. Surface living will never help us find out who we truly are.

2 COMMANDMENTS

One of the most important purposes of any religious literature is to help those who read it to decide how to live. Life is complicated and full of individual choices. Nearly everyone, not just religious people, agrees that societies need commonly-accepted rules or there would be chaos. This was one of the main reasons why many of the books of the Bible were written. There is a good deal of overlap between the moral codes of all the major religions – at least in theory – and, I would argue, with what most of us ‘instinctively’ know to be best for us. Our common humanity is often enough to give us a clue, even if we no longer feel the need for an external God to authenticate it.

The obvious place to start is the 10 Commandments, of which we have two different versions (which actually add up to 12); one in Exodus 20 and another in Deuteronomy 5. Like the two creation stories, this is evidence that material was brought together from at least two separate traditions, and probably more, which had reached different understandings and even had different names for ‘God’. The editors are already at work. The Commandments cannot actually come from the time of Moses, (roughly the C13th BC), but reflect the kind of settled communities that were not established until about 500 years later. These rules are for a society of stable families and smallholders living in villages and towns, not for nomadic tribes trekking across deserts.

Most of them are about not doing things, rather than about what to do, which is not particularly useful. Naturally for their context, they begin with a recognition of the authority of the One God. If you seriously want to see a return to the morality of the 10 Commandments, as some people argue, then you also have to accept their very demanding theological basis as well. They are a contract between us and a very early concept of a God and I’m not sure that many of those who advocate them always want to go that far.

But they don’t actually give us an awful lot to go on and leave a lot of questions unanswered. Of course murder, theft, adultery etc. are a ‘bad thing’; few would argue with that. But who will define when it’s definitely a murder, or is all killing effectively prohibited because you can’t always be sure of a person’s motive? Is avoiding paying all your tax theft, or just clever use of accountancy? What do we actually do about the marriages that have been killed by unfaithfulness and cruelty rather than just settling for condemning those who are responsible?

A rule doesn’t necessarily prevent the behaviour. And what about all the moral issues that aren’t mentioned here because they weren’t around at the time? We need more help. The Jewish tradition gives us much more, though perhaps surprisingly, the 10 Commandments are hardly mentioned again until the teaching of Jesus. They were supplemented by

thousands of other rules, regulations and interpretations, much of which fill the first few books but which we cannot seriously be expected to live by today. I could choose hundreds of examples, but I'd really rather not rely on a priest to diagnose my skin disease or see people stoned to death for blasphemy. (The 10 Commandments outlawed murder, but killing someone for their opinions sounds pretty close to me). It can never be as simple as just 'do what the Bible says'. New rules have always been needed for new situations.

The book of Proverbs, always worth a read and often quite entertaining, especially in a modern translation, goes into a bit more detail. Many of them can be read as useful advice in very human situations and have stood the test of time rather better than the ritualistic rules of Leviticus. It's not really doing them justice to see them only in this light; the sayings have a complex relationship with the concept of 'Wisdom' which means much more than just being wise. But there is a lot of helpful common sense among the sometimes more opaque imagery. Pride does indeed go before a fall (16 v.18), and it is certainly not a good idea to be led astray by strong drink (20 v.1).

Much of our sense of morality comes down to doing what we know is right, or at least not doing the opposite. Centuries later Jesus of Nazareth picked up the idea of the 'golden rule' in his teaching – always treat others as you would wish to be treated by them. Better even than doing what is best for yourself, is to do what is best for other people. He didn't invent the idea; it comes from the tradition of Rabbi Hillel, his contemporary. His own moral teaching certainly raised some very sharp questions, especially about those who placed more emphasis on the observance of the letter of the law rather than concentrating on its practical effects, but he was not entirely out of step with others of his time.

Quite a lot of what people often call 'Christian' morality comes from the Apostle Paul, not from Jesus, or from later interpretations by the Church that are not in the Bible at all, including what only goes back as far as Victorian 'family values', many of which were riddled with hypocrisy and double standards. Paul, who had very little information about what Jesus himself taught, seems very prescriptive, even intolerant, in some of his statements about the place of women or sexual conduct, for example. But he was writing for a community that believed the end was nigh and some of what he says might be seen as emergency measures to be going on with until the arrival of the much greater crisis that he believed was just around the corner. But even with the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, which many believed would trigger some direct intervention by the God to whom it was dedicated, this cataclysmic change to human history didn't happen. So does his advice still hold good?

The overwhelming emphasis in the New Testament is on the primacy of love as a guide for how to live. That is the 'new' commandment for Jesus, John, and even Paul (at times!) Indeed the writers coined what was virtually a new Greek word – *agape* – to express what they meant. It's not the same as human romantic love; not the same as sexual love and rather more than brotherly love. Other words were available for all these concepts and they didn't use them. 'Agape love' was a reflection of what they believed was the love of God but also turned into the best way that human beings should behave towards each other. Indeed, 'all you need is love'. Given my thesis that religion derives from human activity alone, this quest for a higher form of love in our relationships and actions is something greatly to our collective credit. It has to underpin any kind of spirituality.

It seems to me that, even allowing for the primacy they gave to their God, the Bible writers were just trying to explore the best ways of living in community together, not establishing rules for all time. In practice, sadly, love was often nowhere to be seen in the messy realities of nation-building and it frequently slipped away from its biblical place once the Church got rather more turned on by the prospect of power. But in the end only love is paramount, if you accept their insight. Of course you don't have to; we have the freedom to choose other defining values. But 'God is love', not 'God is the rules', seems to be where they reached. So people like me can affirm that love is the greatest underlying principle against which our decisions must be judged and which can inform our individual human journey. But we are all relativists now, even believers, whatever they may say. It is impossible to be absolutist about anything. (The irony in that sentence is deliberate!)

If only love rules, then the rules themselves don't. Take an example like abortion. I don't think there is a specific biblical reference to the practice as such. It invariably meant a high risk of death for the mother in ancient times. An unwanted pregnancy will often have been a consequence of the commonplace male exploitation of women. But here as elsewhere, modern medical procedures have confronted us with a new problem to solve. We can do it much more safely now. Women have rights too. I assume a traditional religious perspective would always be against it. But if you turn that into the rule, don't you end up sometimes doing the unloving thing? It is always a human tragedy; a sadness which I would always want to avoid. But is it loving to force a woman to have a child she doesn't want, that poses a major risk to her own health or that she cannot care for? Perhaps having the abortion would not be the best choice, but perhaps it would. It is an open question, depending on the particular circumstances.

Theists should be careful before they criticise the rest of us for our alleged immorality on issues like these. The Old Testament is knee-deep in the bodies of Israel's enemies, including women and children, whatever the 10 Commandments said. The Christian Church's historic record is hardly

much better. 50 million indigenous people were wiped out in less than half a century by the conquest of Central America which had a strong religious motivation. Thousands of babies still die because of the lack of effective population control advocated by some Christians. The supposed sacredness of every human life can hardly be based on this evidence. I would rather ask 'What is the loving thing to do? What is the action that most expresses our humanity and care for one another', granted that no one choice is necessarily always right?

That is the reality of human life; a realism which the Bible writers sometimes actually seem to demonstrate in practice. Jesus of Nazareth in particular often broke precious rules and taboos; he was renowned for it. Treating others as I would hope to be treated myself is not about telling them what to do; that's not how I would wish to be treated. I hope, whatever I decide, that I will love and be loved. That is far more important, and ultimately far more human(e).

3 STORIES

The whole business of Christianity is essentially a story – about ourselves and what we have made of the life and death of Jeshua ben Joseph of Nazareth. The whole Bible, from the early books of the Old Testament onwards, is full of stories. People who say they know nothing at all about religion will usually remember at least something about David and Goliath, Joseph and his multi-coloured coat, (though a better translation is probably 'wide-sleeved'), together with Moses in the bulrushes or leading his people out of Egypt. And of course there's the story of Christmas, which still has some residual connection to Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus in most people's minds, even if they've never been near a church in years.

We tend to associate 'stories' with childhood; something to send them off to sleep, so it has an obvious sentimental appeal. School nativities in particular are certainly part of our collective story-telling culture. Even an old curmudgeon like me has to suspend disbelief at this point and concede that the story has a feel-good factor about it, even if much of what we do at Christmas owes more to the pre-existing pagan festival than to the birth of Jesus which was only attached to it later. Almost everyone with children joins in, if just for a few days, whether it's hunting down the stripy tea-towel at the last minute, wiping away a tear as we jostle with other parents to get the best pictures or wondering how a lobster came to be in the stable! I particularly remember the innkeeper who improvised by telling Joseph that of course there was no room - it was always busy at Christmas. Or the Mary who surprised the Angel Gabriel (and probably her teachers and parents), by saying that she couldn't possibly be having a baby because she hadn't 'done anything'!

There indeed lies the problem with taking the whole thing literally. Out of the mouths of babes.... But the Christmas story, like many of those in Genesis, Exodus and in the early histories in Chronicles and Kings, has a very limited basis in fact. The reconstruction of Jesus' early life, only found in Matthew, Luke and other 'infancy gospels' that didn't make it into the agreed canon, had to be done well after the event. There was no-one there to write it down at the time. The stories are obviously heavily influenced by the need to reflect the Old Testament texts and to find a reason why Jesus was born in Bethlehem as required for the Messiah, even though he actually came from Nazareth which was miles away up in Galilee. There are problems reconciling the Roman census and King Herod to the same dates from known history and the wise men story in Matthew suggests a different venue and possibly a later time from the birth story in Luke. They are two quite independent accounts, unrelated to each other, not a continuous narrative as they are usually presented.

And it doesn't actually work as 'fact'. Jesus was not 'of David's line' as the prophets had written if Joseph was not his biological father. Of course, if you regard it all as a 'myth'- a different kind of truth - none of this really matters. But dig a little deeper into this story and it's not really very suitable for children at all, like so many of the Biblical stories. It is after all, as the little Mary made clear, about sex, (or the alleged lack of it) and about violence, when it comes to Herod's reaction to the news. David and Goliath is about a battle and a bloody death; Moses' exodus is set against the background of another massacre of children and then the drowning of an entire army. Or to choose some others: David had a man killed because he wanted to steal his wife; Salome 'danced' for Herod in return for the head of John the Baptist. Ultimately it's all about a bloody crucifixion, and so on.

On reflection, I'm not sure that much of the Bible is at all appropriate as a children's story-book. There might be a common cause here. I once heard someone from the evangelical wing of the Church say that there's a danger in vaccinating children with a little bit of faith because it makes sure they don't catch it properly when they grow up. Do they see any difference between the stories they hear about Jesus and the ones they hear at the pantomime? It all gets seen later as a fantasy; Santa, Peter Pan, Jesus; they're all the same, just as 'Jingle Bells' might now be called a 'carol'. Perhaps Christian parents would be better advised to stick to C.S. Lewis and let the Bible wait awhile.

The Judao/Christian tradition is not the only one to rely heavily on stories, though others too were certainly not just for children. The Greeks and the Romans had a magnificent array of tales about their rather naughty gods and how they interacted with human beings. Hinduism and Buddhism have a similarly rich and sensuous tradition. We have always chosen stories as the way to keep a truth alive, without necessarily worrying too much whether they 'actually happened'. There was no real Good Samaritan, or Othello or Oliver Twist, but they all still tell us something important about ourselves.

The Bible writers understood that stories have a power; so they personalised great tribal movements into the stories of individuals: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. They gave inspiring examples of heroism and faithfulness like Noah and Daniel. They told stories to provide examples and role-models, like the boy Samuel committing himself to serving his God and the lives of at least the better kings. In a culture that relied on oral tradition, these were then retold, each generation to the next, with no doubt some embellishment along the way, much as we look to look back to great individuals from our collective past like Nelson, Wellington, Churchill and Stanley Matthews!

So what stories can we tell about our lives today, and where to look? Personally, I wouldn't recommend looking back over our shoulders so much, important though it is to know our history. In our much faster-

moving context we need to concentrate more on creating our own stories and finding our own truths here and now, not trying to import them from what's gone before. That's actually what many of the Bible writers did; they wrote from their individual experience as well as looking to the past. We live in the present; but the future is increasingly what concerns us. That's why just reading something from the Bible is often fairly meaningless in practice.

When I was at school in the 1960s, the staff regularly included heroic true-life stories in their otherwise somewhat desultory Christian assemblies. They were supposed to inspire us to grow up and become 'real' men: Douglas Bader; Captain Scott; Edmund Hillary etc. But what had they got to do with us? We were infinitely more interested in the Beatles and Marianne Faithfull! One person's fascinating story is another's total boredom. Neither would I suggest paying too much attention to the media. The word 'gospel' means 'good news', but you won't find much of that in the Daily Mail! We much prefer bad news; stories of failure and of people who are clearly not as good as we are. A nation can hope to make itself feel better this way, especially when times are hard, by revelling in the weaknesses of others that we think we don't have. 'Millions of people don't riot'; '99% of children and young people are in school today or only absent with their school's permission' – not very snappy headlines.

We are altogether too interested in what other people are up to. I would rather look much closer to home. There are repeated themes in the Bible's stories that are still a part of our own lives, like triumph over adversity and people moving on from disaster to new horizons and new opportunities. Old Testament Joseph is a good example. Maybe he was a bit of a pain in constantly lecturing his brothers but sibling rivalry went a bit too far when they left him in a pit to die. But he made it good in Egypt and was eventually reconciled with his family, despite spells of imprisonment and exposure to the illicit charms of an older woman along the way. You couldn't make it up! It sounds as contemporary as 'EastEnders'.

But what can I learn from it? We each need to grow beyond our love of stories as children and work out what will carry us into mature and interdependent adulthood. Essentially, we need to be our own authors; to write our own stories. What is there about our individual and collective lives that we want to treasure now, and pass on for the future? If someone (perish the thought!) was writing the story of my life, what would there be to say? I ought to know. Our own story should be what sustains us in a culture that is often dehumanising and anonymous.

Religions used to provide a personal meaning that many cannot now embrace. So consequently there is also a danger that the vacuum that is left can make life feel pointless and our own part in it totally unimportant. Loss of faith might be interpreted as loss of value. That way lies despair, and it's not true. Our society may appear to glory only in wealth, success,

celebrity, perfect health etc. – all kinds of things about other people that may be beyond our individual reach – but what really counts is the person that I am and the potential that I have.

I don't get that from a God. I get it from my own 'positive self-regard', if hopefully reinforced by others; my own unique humanity. There is no God-Being out there who can do that for me. I need others to love, encourage and support me along the way. And they do. So let's celebrate it as best we can. Let's fill the album with photos and cover the page in excited scribbly writing before it's too late. Now. Today. It's the only way to live.

4 SONGS AND POEMS

Around the middle of the Bible the whole thing appears to go off at a tangent. The story is just getting interesting and we come across a hymn-book! Job, the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon even look different from the other books; much more like poetry than a narrative. But this seems only right if we are to reflect the variety of human art forms in our spirituality, and not just literature.

Music, song and poetry have always played a vital part in our self-expression and in forming our understanding of ourselves. Indeed I would argue that they are among our greatest human achievements and carry massive potential to aid us in any kind of spiritual journey. When I am occasionally in 'my' local Cathedral, usually for Sung Evensong, I hear the Psalms as part of the regular liturgy. Many are extremely obscure at this distance and I really wonder what other people make of them. Perhaps, like me, they are mostly enjoying the sublime music and singing. But, despite that slight inaccessibility, they are an interlude in the biblical journey that enables us to express some of our own deepest feelings and I am generally glad that they are there.

I'm not so sure about the Song of Solomon (or Song of Songs). It's a love poem, and there is plenty of entirely secular literature from the same time that is similar. It seems it was only included because a few of the ancient scholars saw it as an allegory for our relationship with God, but there's no real basis for that belief. It has also influenced the idea that the Church is the 'bride of Christ'; a particularly inappropriate analogy for many of us, men or women.

The Psalms in particular are where the emphasis seems to shift away from what the writers thought God has to say to us and onto what we want to say to Him. That's not the whole story, but much of this literature, like all artistic expression, gets us closer to human emotions than elsewhere. There are more obviously human voices to be heard at this point: like the questions the Psalmists keep asking, Job in his agonising over the meaning of his suffering and the domestic and practical advice of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

These books are collectively known as the 'Wisdom' literature, though the idea isn't confined only to them alone. Wisdom was not just a human characteristic, but a concept, almost a mystical person in its own right; a third voice alongside the Law and the Prophets. The books were associated with king Solomon because the historical record suggested that the exercise of wisdom had been a feature of his reign. Who can forget the story about the dispute over who was the mother of a child in 1 Kings 3? Solomon suggested cutting the baby in two. The woman who then surrendered her own claim to prevent it happening would obviously be the real mother. Genius!

Similarly the Psalms were associated with David because the histories showed him to have been a musician. But these writings were gathered together later than this period, if in part from much older sources. They may also reflect the traditions of ancient Egypt and other neighbouring civilisations way beyond the Jewish nation. The faith journey has always been as much about assimilation from the wider world as about maintaining any unique insight. The Bible doesn't operate separately from its culture; then, since or now. The Wisdom writers are people like us, living the same kind of human life that we live, not some special class of person charged with communicating a truth that the rest of us can't grasp. I would call them 'Everyman' if that wasn't just a male image.

The individual authors are unknown; probably a whole range of people. Perhaps professional song-writers and poets attached to the Temple, or even priests in their own right. The writings were used in worship, but also in teaching – the Hebrew word is *mashal* which crops up again as part of the stylistic context for the parables of Jesus. The emphasis is mostly this-worldly, whatever the theological subtext; worldly wisdom, if with a deeper significance as well.

So there is plenty here for the non-believer to get her teeth into. And many of the writings have inspired other artistic endeavours since, from a top ten hit for Boney M, to 'Turn, turn turn' by the Byrds. It's this passage from Ecclesiastes 3 that has engaged my attention this time. 'For everything there is a season'. It's a whole series of poetic opposites and contrasts – no doubt there is a proper literary name for it. There is a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to plant and a time to reap the harvest, and so on. I have often invented new ones of my own over the years. I used to say to my children when they were little that there was a time to get dressed and a time to get undressed again, so go and get ready for bed! There is a time to score goals and a time to let the opposition score – when you're already 4-0 up! These days it's more likely to be that there is a time to stand up but also a time to sit down please so that I can see what's going on!

The range of contrasts posed by the writer is huge, dealing with almost all the human activities that still preoccupy us: life and death; love and hate; war and peace; mourning and dancing; destroying and healing. Life is rarely about a safe smooth passage down the middle, avoiding all tensions to right and left. It's much more like a small sailing boat; tacking this way and that, sometimes doing completely different things than before because our circumstances are constantly changing. As I raised briefly in my discussion on morality earlier, there are times when making one choice is entirely right, and other times when it is right to do the opposite. That seems to me like an essential insight in contrast to those who want to tell us there is only ever 'one way' to go.

The idea that there is a time to die, for example, as well as a time to be born, is a particularly complex pair of challenges facing us as individuals and as a human race. We are grappling with both increased ageing and life-expectancy, and with the moral choices posed by both infertility and preventing childhood diseases and disabilities. Some people scarcely live at all and die long before their proper time, while others seem to live beyond it. I am immensely moved by the plight of those who want to die at a time of their own choosing, not when the body has lingered on after the person has already gone. I hope beyond all measure that this enforced existence, because that's all it often is, will not happen to me.

The Theist may argue of course that these times are fixed and it's not for us to change them. It's God's time that matters, not ours. That's clearly not true; it fails to make any allowance for the randomness of things or for the impact of human freewill. There is no time for which we are pre-set, unless you believe in a very cruel God who programmes millions for a life that adds up to next to nothing. There are times when death seems right and times when it doesn't, either because life has gone on too long or because it's not gone on for long enough. It is pointless to wish to avoid death, but I hope I personally have the chance to feel that it comes at the 'right' time.

There is a time to keep hold of things, and people, and a time to let go of them. Children are the obvious example. I am very proud of my children but I want their achievements to reflect on them, not on me. There is a time to speak up and a time to keep silent, and, as the prayer says, a great deal of wisdom is sometimes needed in order to know when each is appropriate. Relationships don't necessarily prosper by always saying what you're thinking – and I don't just mean the best thing to do when confronted with 'does my bum look big in this?'

Secular and humanist people are sometimes told they have no standards by which to live. As we saw earlier, one traditional role for religion is to create an external framework for living in order to avoid the confusion of not knowing what to do. Obviously that certainty is very powerful and immensely reassuring, for some at least. The only religious faiths that appear to be growing, or at least surviving, are those that provide people with the personal security of knowing they are right – from fundamentalist Christians to militant jihadists.

But that apparent success doesn't necessarily make the idea good for us. Wisdom suggests greater caution. There is a time to be certain, but also a time to be open and questioning. There is a time to nail your colours to the mast, but also a time to listen to the other person's point of view. There is even a time, as the writer of Job suggests, for doubt as well as a time for faith. It seems to me unavoidable that we can never know ultimate truths beyond all possibility of contradiction and that those who claim to do so should be regarded with great suspicion.

I don't know whether it really is the little bit of grit in the oyster that eventually creates the pearl. But I do know that there is a time for the awkward question, the unexpected insight or the point of view that is not just outside the box but outside the warehouse! Without the irritant voice suggesting that perhaps the time has come to consider the very opposite of what we had always thought was true, something very precious about us may be lost. Pause for further thought. A time to start this essay, and a time to end it!

5 INCONVENIENT TRUTHS

I have borrowed this phrase from Al Gore and his work on the environment, but for me it gets us into a whole chunk of the Bible under the title of the 'Prophets'. Let's deal with the obvious point first. Prophecy in the Bible is not mostly about someone supposedly having some kind of religious experience that enables them to see into the future. Even if it were, I wouldn't personally take much notice, (especially as it was certainly written up after the event). History, right up to the present day, is littered with those who claimed to know their God's timetable and then had to eat their words when they turned out to be wrong.

Neither do I primarily mean a prediction of what will inevitably result if, for example, we don't do more to combat global warming or reduce our reliance on finite fuels. That's a scientific hypothesis and we should listen to it if it's well-founded. Greta Thunberg is a kind of prophet of this kind. A great deal of important work is being done to secure a future for our planet, or at least to find ways of dealing with the environmental changes that the human race has always had to face. But it's not the future that's my primary point of contact with the Bible writers but the present.

Most of the Biblical prophets were around during the time of the divided Kingdoms of Israel and Judah; the 9th to the 6th centuries BC. We don't know a great deal about most of them as individuals. There must have been more than one Isaiah, (perhaps 3), given the period of time covered by 'his' writings. I'm rather fond of Jeremiah; not actually the misery that the word has come to mean. Like others, he sometimes accompanied his words with prophetic actions, like buying a field when property prices were about to crash, as a sign of hope for the future. Hosea was the victim of an unfaithful wife and comes across, to me at least, as a very real person; Ezekiel gave us the vision of the dried-up valley of bones; a powerful metaphor for what life can become.

But my favourite has always been Amos; not least because he was very much an amateur prophet; a shepherd, not any kind of priest or religious figure. He came from the southern kingdom but, perhaps wisely, his career as a prophet was in the north, where Jereboam II was king; (793-753 B.C.) These were prosperous times for the nation; material affluence and a powerful voice in the region. They'd never had it so good but Amos was unstinting in his emphasis on the problems that lay below the surface. Like any good public speaker he begins by slagging off the enemy and getting the crowd on his side; then just as people were beginning to think 'this guy talks a lot of sense', he turns on them. Calling the women of Samaria 'fat cows' must have gone down a storm! It's the nation's hypocrisy which is his primary focus. The royal coffers and the holy temples might be full; the religious songs and offerings might be a constant background to the nation's life. But to Amos' God it was all just the noise of a clashing cymbal and He would really rather they shut up!

Because their national and personal lives were corrupt, selfish and unjust. The rich were getting richer and the poor poorer; they were building their fancy houses and eating and drinking to their heart's content on the backs of those who actually did all the work. Justice and the 'right ways of living' demand something different. All their praising God was meaningless and it would end in tears. They would do well not to long for a day of judgement because it might not turn out quite as they were expecting. Be careful what you wish for! Faith in their God would not protect them if their lives were all wrong.

Jesus of Nazareth seems to have said much the same in the parable about the sheep and the goats. There is surely a secular message here about the way we should organise ourselves? Not all human values are the same. For Amos it might have been about how much some of them offended God; I would say it's about how much they offend my own sense of what is right. We should be discovering what is best for us all; what is basically 'human'. Amos could see no purpose in religion if it didn't challenge the nation. We can seek to fill the churches all we want, but if the way we live now doesn't address inequalities and change things for the better, it seems we are wasting our own (and God's) time.

There's surely enough of a common agenda here for the believer and the non-believer alike? If the ancient stories were intended to light up the present from the past, the prophets told it like it was, now. I think of them as more like social commentators or investigative journalists, at least those of the more responsible kind. Lifting up stones that others wanted to leave alone; holding a mirror up to their communities and making them look at what they would rather not see.

This is a tricky task to get right and, perhaps understandably, people of faith often shy away from it. The Archbishop of Canterbury can try to give a lead in helping us to examine our nation's values. But if he is seen to criticise the government, he is likely to get his knuckles rapped; by both his own side and theirs! The Prime Minister has to approve his appointment in the first place – perhaps too many compromises are required to retain a prophetic status. Or is he just speaking for a small minority who can't really claim to be at the centre of things anymore? In which case he can easily be ignored.

The Old Testament prophets had no such worries. They knew they were outsiders; often misfits and outcasts who didn't subscribe to the accepted way of living. But what they had to say, however inconvenient, seems to have had a truth that was inescapable. So maybe we too should look elsewhere. Just as institutional religion seems no longer to be in tune with the mood of our secular culture, institutional politics looks equally out of touch. It's as difficult to get people to join a political party as it is to get them to go to church. We are reluctant to be members of anything, in part because we often feel let down by those who are supposed to be further along the road than we are. Perhaps our horizons have become

more limited as affluence has made us more comfortable. Perhaps many of the certainties of the past no longer seem to work or to offer much by way of improvement so many have given up bothering to hope for anything better.

There is clearly a gross unfairness in the way our national and global financial systems operate and there are signs that the assumptions on which we have relied for the last couple of centuries are not sustainable. The poor of Africa would say 'Join the club' – it's always been like that as far as they are concerned. Many people are campaigning against the impact of cuts to their local jobs and services. We are promised yet more years of austerity and belt-tightening as we will all have to pay back the costs of the Covid crisis, (much of which actually seem to have been wasted). But some are asking if the burden is being fairly shared, or are those most likely to be affected also those who have few other sources of support to turn to? This is not just about the occasional library closure and the caricature of a politically-correct community project that no-one will miss. Some very vulnerable people rely on these services for their daily care, even for their food and shelter. You can't just take them away and expect everything to carry on regardless.

Some of the private-sector bonuses and share options still going to those already on fabulous salaries, (including former senior politicians), are an obscenity when so many struggle for the basics. For all the talk, virtually nothing is being done to curb the excesses of the City and its institutions. I suspect the Covid vaccine drug companies (and their political representatives) will make a great deal of profit in the end and many of the poorest nations will be left way behind the rest. The biblical standard is a constant call for fairness and justice, not for what is expedient. Our politicians and church leaders have to be held to account and challenged to speak the truth and deal with injustices – very Amos! I'm grateful for all those who have their eye on it all even if I don't always agree with everything they do. It's the job of prophets to push at the boundaries, even if it hurts us.

I realise that the Old Testament prophets also called the people back to their God as they understood Him. I shouldn't ignore that element of Amos' challenge either, but I have to re-interpret it. We seem to have few theological prophets these days who are prepared to question the literal understanding of faith that seems to be required. Where are the free-thinkers and experimenters that we had in the 1970s? I guess they have given up. I have come close to doing the same but the prophets' voice is also a call to keep exploring my own idea of personal spirituality; to keep seeking to become a better person. Not to be cynical, complacent or morally lazy, but to keep focused especially around my response to the human Jesus who seems to have spoken frequently about this kind of thing.

But the evidence that both Jesus and the prophets were looking for was in the life of the nation as a whole, not just in what went on in the Temple. Religion is pointless unless it changes the world and, sadly, its adherents sometimes seem less than interested in this bigger picture. Spirituality is not about doing what I hope will work out best for me. It's about discovering where we each fit within our corporate human responsibility for one another. Faith is not about following a path to personal glory; to save your life you have to be prepared to give it away. The state of my own 'soul' should be the last thing on my mind when confronted with where the world around me is broken and unjust. Is this still an inconvenient truth that the faithful need to hear from someone on the outside? I dare to suggest so.

6 GOSPELS

How many gospels are there in the New Testament? Almost everyone with any knowledge of the Christian story at all would immediately say '4': Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Mark is the earliest one; Luke and Matthew seem to have shared a source about the life and teaching of Jesus that Mark didn't know about, (sometimes called 'Q'), as well as having individual sources of their own. These three are known as the 'synoptic' gospels because they look at things in a similar way. John was the last to be written, from what looks like a quite different, more mystical tradition, using almost entirely material known only to him and which may contain little or nothing of what Jesus actually said.

The evangelical Christian might say 'one': the Gospel (good news) of the New Testament is the same, no matter who's telling it. Jesus died on the cross for our sins, rose again to be with God in heaven and, through faith in him, the believer can receive the promise of eternal life. That's the most important part of the story, they would say. This gospel is not however primarily found in Mark, Matthew or Luke (and only a little bit in John). It's mostly in Romans. Other Christians would remind us however, that the story about Jesus is not the same as the story Jesus himself told. Jesus did not primarily teach that salvation was available through him or that his death would do all this. There are hints here and there, but we can never be sure how much we have the actual words of Jesus at this point, rather than a later reading back of what the early Christians now believed about him. The good news that Jesus preached was the imminent arrival of the kingdom, or the rule, of God. That seems to have been his focus.

This good news about the kingdom was effectively lost once the Jesus movement left its Jewish roots behind and became a force to be reckoned within the wider Gentile world. The message shifted onto who Jesus was and what he was believed to have done by dying, not so much on what he said when he was alive. Much of the theology, (such as the doctrine of the Trinity and theories of the Atonement, for example), came along much later still, along with most of the contents of the various Creeds. As the Christian religion evolved from the initial events, far less interest was shown in what Jesus himself taught, whether or not this was what he had intended.

So we are up to 6 'gospels' now! Is it possible that almost the whole of Christianity is founded on a misunderstanding or even a distortion of what Jesus of Nazareth was all about? It may seem ridiculous and arrogant to suggest so. But we are extremely privileged to have been offered new insights by biblical and historical scholars over the last 200 or so years about the way things changed over time. That information was not available to those who came before us. It's just a pity that the

mainstream Church seems happy to ignore them and to carry on as they have always done.

This makes quite a difference. If the gospel is all about what Jesus did by dying, then believing in him is all that matters. The news, though I am not personally convinced that it is all that 'good', is that God is offering us a new relationship with Him through his 'Son', so obviously faith in both of them is required. If there is no God in an objective sense who has acted in Jesus to put right the barrier that allegedly exists between us, then there is nothing here for people like me to believe in and I should just walk away.

So this isn't news as far as I am concerned. There is no good news in the offer of salvation through Jesus unless you accept that you are a doomed sinner to start with. If I am not enslaved by my sin, because that is not actually the way things are, then there is no news in telling me that I can be released from it. A sociologist might suggest that this is just another example of classic marketing. You tell people that they have a need, which they might not even realise that they have. And then you sell them a solution.

I'm not necessarily saying that the Church has been deliberately deceptive, though some would go that far. I'm just saying that there is nothing here for those of us who don't accept the basic premise, and that's why Christians and their message are mostly ignored. It's not 'news' for the person dependent on benefits or who has no mortgage, and no prospect of getting one, that the borrowing rate has gone up or down. It's not 'news' to the starving poor of the horn of Africa that a footballer has been transferred between clubs for £80 million. The news has to relate to our experience if it's going to have any meaning or significance.

Telling me that a God (who I don't believe exists in the usual sense), can be friends with me by overlooking my state of disobedience (which I don't believe I'm in), and that's the way I can obtain eternal life (which I neither want nor accept is a reality), is never going to mean very much to me or to millions like me. I really don't understand why so many people of faith can't grasp this. They keep trying to sell us something we don't want or need. It's just their opinion that I should and I don't share it. Of course I may be mistaken, but there's no point in just telling me I'm wrong.

But if the gospel is really about the message that Jesus himself seems to have been most interested in, then there is still plenty for us to talk about. Jesus certainly expressed his gospel in terms of the kingdom of 'God'. That is inescapable and I have no intention of putting words into his mouth. But the meaning of the news he had to share, made explicit in Luke 4 v.18-19, was the difference that it would make, not where it came from. The rule of his God meant good news for the poor, release to the captives, sight for the blind and liberty for the oppressed. This news is not about having to convince people first that they need it; the poor know

they are poor; the captives know they are captives etc. And even if there is no 'God' behind it all, such changes for the better in our human experience are surely worth it in themselves?

Some would try to 'spiritualise' these statements. People like me are 'spiritually' blind, poor etc. because of our lack of faith. Some would argue that this was what Jesus actually meant, given his obvious concern to liberate Jewishness from a captivity to the Law, ritual and so on that seems to have been part of his calling. His mission was to 'open their eyes' to a new kind of faith, not to change the way the world is. How ironic then that the religion that bears his name is still pretty much the same as it was then: just a new kind of institution instead.

But the 'impact' of Jesus' teaching and life, (a very contemporary word in education which makes us focus on the effects of what we do, not only on what we do), was on the actual poor, blind etc. The difference that Jesus made seems to have been self-evident to those he encountered. In the stories that he told about normal everyday life - farming, families, precious things getting lost and so on - his hearers found a new understanding of themselves and a clearer sense of their purpose and value there and then. It was all about discovering the sometimes hidden rule of the 'Father' - the way things are rather than only the way they sometimes appear.

Despite the absence of a supernatural God for me, I am happy to accept that there may be clues here about how we can discover our deeper selves and uncover greater truths about our human reality. The things that Jesus was remembered as saying are still important, even if I can't accept the theology. This is why I am still attracted by the Judao/Christian story. I too want to affirm that it's high time the poor heard some good news and that those who are oppressed found freedom. There is a manifesto for a better life here that any humanist should also want to bring about.

This is not 'being a Christian'. But it might be 'being a kingdom person' as Jesus intended. It means keeping your eyes open to what's going on, not blundering through life not giving what happens a second thought. It means doing what you can to help set people free from the tyrannies that oppress us; from the slavery of abuse, drink and drugs that blight the lives of so many, to campaigning for a fair system of benefits for the poor or international human rights. It means seeking what is best for our life together, not standing in judgement over one another. It means looking for the positives in otherwise bleak situations and doing what you can to make people feel better about who they are. This sounds like more than enough to be getting on with!

I cannot say if Jesus of Nazareth would recognise this as the core of what he was all about. I do genuinely think that it is closer to his intentions than much of what the Church has got up to since in looking after itself. But we can only live the life we have and respond to our experiences as

we come across them on the way. Life is for living to the full and it can be lived well. If that isn't good news, then I'm not sure what is.

7 SIGNS AND WONDERS

The Bible writers frequently talk about 'miracles'. So, simple question: 'Are they telling the truth?' Complicated answer, I'm afraid, like most things in life. If we mean, 'did they happen?', then the answer is the same as for everything else. We can't be sure. The writers weren't usually witnesses to the events they wrote about. Sometimes they wrote decades later, sometimes centuries. They weren't always interested in just describing things like reporters, so it rather depends on what credibility you give to them. But I am giving at least limited credence to most of the things they wrote about, so, yes, such events should at least be included as part of the story.

If we mean 'were they miracles?', in the sense that they cannot possibly be explained except by some kind of supernatural Divine intervention that broke the normal rules and which knocked people off their feet at the time, then that's an entirely different question. I don't know what happened. I wasn't there either. But even if they happened as described, inexplicably, such events don't really tell us anything now. It still all depends on how you choose to interpret them.

But ask me 'were there signs and wonders to be found in the events they wrote about?', and I have a lot more to say. This takes us on to the significance of the events rather than just seeing them as some kind of spectacle to be admired. We tend to get bogged down in the 'miraculous' question, when it's their meaning that matters. As a rational 21st century person with a sociological education and a pretty good idea of the way the world works, I can offer an 'explanation' for quite a lot of them if that helps. I plan to do that briefly first. But the real point is 'what did they mean?' and can we see anything like them today?

It strikes me as highly dangerous to base a faith, in God or in anything else, on the fact that something happens which we can't otherwise explain. If someone from Old Testament times were to visit me today, virtually everything about my life would strike them as a 'miracle'. They would constantly be seeing evidence, in their terms, for the miraculous workings of their God, from invisible electronic wizardry to flying metal boxes in the sky. But they all have scientific explanations. We know what they didn't. No theology is required. Or if we define a miracle as something that happens out of time, before it should as it were, then we're not really in biblical territory at all. The events weren't a wormhole from the future like in an episode of Dr Who. God didn't do something in Bible times that should have waited until it had been invented. (If He could, why not wait until we created the internet before saving the world; then everyone would have known about it instantly?)

There is always a huge risk for believers in attributing something to God because we can't explain it yet. That's the 'God of the gaps' and there's not much left for Him to do, now that we understand so much more than we did and which used to be put down to Him. Nothing in this kind of approach 'proves' anything as far as I am concerned. Many of the Bible's more outstanding events do have a rational explanation available if you choose to see them that way, as I generally do of course. The Re(e)d Sea parted for Moses and destroyed the Egyptian army. Well maybe the tide came in or the ground was marshy. We have all seen the power of tsunamis, earthquakes and floods. The 'manna' from heaven could well have been some natural phenomenon; Moses found a mountain spring for the people to drink from, and so on.

I don't see any current evidence for a God who breaks the rules of the natural world. It generally does what it routinely does. The problem with any other understanding is that there are far more examples when the 'miracle' doesn't happen. Why does this child live but not that one? A few odd exceptions that we can't explain don't actually make much difference to our overall world view and they pose very real questions about the morality of such arbitrary interventions.

So what about the Gospel miracles? Jesus (or those who wrote about him later) seems to have played down attempts to see him as some kind of wonder-worker. He didn't want people to follow him because he could do impressive tricks. When something unexpected happened, according to the writers, he often told those concerned to keep it to themselves. That may be a literary device to explain why Jesus wasn't recognised as the Messiah at the time, but it may also suggest that this was his preferred style or that the events formed no part of anyone's actual memory. The 'kingdom of God', his constant refrain, was a subtle and hidden thing, not a spectacular takeover. And of course there are ways to explain at least some of his 'miracles', or they may just have been written up later.

Don't tell me that 5000 people went into the desert all day without any food. If this is an actual event at all, (and it probably isn't, given the different versions in different contexts), it's just saying that they were too mean to share and the 'miracle' was that Jesus shamed them into doing so through the example of a small boy. Or it's all a Eucharistic metaphor invented by the author. John's story of Jesus turning water into wine or raising Lazarus from the dead clearly had a primarily symbolic meaning. (Everything in John's gospel is symbolic not merely factual. If not, it's very odd that the other gospel writers don't seem to be aware of such momentous events). Chronic physical and mental illnesses can be affected by receiving love, care and acceptance when you've previously been treated as an outcast all your life. Miracles don't have to be understood supernaturally. Jesus certainly seems to have had a power to heal; but that was nothing unusual at the time.

The ability of the human body, and especially the mind, to put things right sometimes seems to confound all the odds. More traditional societies may still have something to teach us here. But the healings and so on still take place within a fixed cultural understanding. Some of them may have struck those who saw them at the time as inexplicable. We might now know better; that has been the nature of the human journey over the centuries as more and more has been studied and understood.

So, for those of us who are not going to be convinced that the world is actually very different from how it seems, (but only very occasionally), what might we still be able to discern from these kinds of stories? They are not evidence of an external God; they are reminders that we need to be constantly on the lookout for whatever will make us more fully human. Life contains the possibility of amazing us, perhaps when we least expect it – I am happy to affirm that. But such events normally restore the status quo, or bring about an improvement in our lives. They don't take us out of our human experiences, they send us back into them refreshed. If the sick are healed; even if the dead are raised back to life, they will still get ill and die again later. If the moment of liberation comes, there will be more challenges in the desert ahead. The miraculous event doesn't solve all the problems; it just gives us a fighting chance to get it right next time.

I have seen several 'miracles' in that sense. The birth of my children and grandson; the love I have received in later life when I thought that all hope of love was lost; recovery from a serious illness; the young woman I know whose life was saved by the skill of surgeons in removing her brain tumour. We've all had opportunities like these. Like most things, it's not so much about what happens as about how we make use of what happens. An alcoholic can be marvellously healed of her addiction and then go on to live a full life, or not, as the case may be. The new chance can be given, and then be used, or not. There are moments on our journey when things change, perhaps in ways we had never expected or do not feel able to control. They can become signs, and be followed by wonders. Or they can be ignored and wasted.

My quest for a personal spirituality that does not involve a God recognises that there is still much work to be done. Seeking 'spiritual entertainment' is not enough. Wonderfully impressive things might happen in a church as is sometimes claimed, but so what? To me, the ability to write and perform sublime music is a 'miracle'. I certainly can't do it myself; its complexity is way beyond my comprehension. But after I've witnessed a perfectly-performed choral anthem, or even a piano recital that has moved me to tears but with no overtly 'religious' content, am I going to be any different than before? That's what makes it a 'miracle'. Otherwise it's all over once the moment has passed. Being alive is a gift, whether from a God or from my parents. Either way I didn't ask for it, deserve or earn it. It just happened, like everything else. The key issue is what I'm going to do with it. Along the way there will be events that bring me up

short, make me think, make me cry or make me laugh. There will be times when I am bowled over by the surprise of something, or someone. 'What next?' should be our constant response.

I have only once been in a serious car accident. The van driver was so concerned to answer his phone that he didn't notice he'd drifted onto the wrong side of the road and he hit me head-on. The first thing I knew about it was when the airbag exploded into my face. As I sat there, wondering if I still had legs and smelling the leaking petrol, I didn't see my life flashing before me. I was rather more worried about the chap outside who was offering me a cigarette! The fact that I walked away with just minor injuries was down to chance and the prompt action of the emergency services, but mostly to the clever design of the car.

No supernatural intervention was involved, though others are not so lucky. The idea that a God selects some situations to get involved in but not others, or that His actions are entirely random as He thinks fit, are both equally indefensible. But sometimes I will be confronted by signs that life is precious. Sometimes I have a new opportunity to go on exploring the wonder of it all. Life is awesome and sometimes surprises. Better by far than an uneventful mediocrity.

8 MEALS

The Bible is packed with lunches, if you'll forgive the expression. Eating and drinking crop up far more often than might be expected from writings that are supposed to be concerned with what we usually think of as 'spiritual' matters. It is true that humankind cannot live by bread 'alone'. But neither could we exist for long without it and meals have a long tradition of personal and social significance. Food has often been associated with sex, rituals, rites of passage and death, just to give four obvious examples that can be found in almost every culture. Judging by how often it's on TV, cooking, not just eating, also seems to have taken over from DIY as our latest shared 'religion'.

We had best go back again to basics first: the story of Adam and Eve eating together from the 'fruit of the tree of knowledge'. This is 'just' a story; though it is better seen as a 'myth' because of its deeper meaning. It is nonsense even to suggest that the whole human race can be traced back to two actual individuals and a once-perfect paradise. Gradual evolution has occurred all over the place. Neither was it ever an 'apple' though I bet many people would initially argue the point if asked. Many things assumed to be in the Bible are not actually there. But the decision in which they shared together is one of the fundamental divisions between theists and atheists.

If there is a God as traditionally understood, conventional faith says that by this act we chose to disobey Him and tried to become like Him; a mistake for which we are each still held responsible. If there is no God, of that kind at least, that same step into self-knowledge, and the consequent ability to make moral choices, is when we ceased to be sub-human and became of age. I for one am very grateful for this ancient discovery of our full potential and we couldn't be who we are without it. It's not a 'sin' at all. It's a pretty important difference.

I was very fond of the ageing black Labrador who used to share my life and worship me like a god, only very occasionally asserting his unique identity in ways he knew I did not approve of! It was touching to see his devotion, no doubt heavily influenced by making sure his food bowl was replenished and he was taken for walks. But I wouldn't want to live like that myself. We are not the pet of a God; we never were. We are changed for the better as we 'digest' the things we have seen, done and heard and then reflect upon them. How else would we grow?

But the idea that eating has the capacity both to lead us astray and can be one of the greatest pleasures of human existence, also has a rather contemporary ring. When about a third of the world's people can't find enough to eat and significant numbers eat to the point of self-destructive excess, the significance of the human capacity to decide how to live is still graphically illustrated by the same image. It is indeed the fruits of our

ever-developing knowledge that have the capacity to turn us into gods, or the opposite. It's a high-risk strategy, but I don't see how we could be human otherwise. The ancient writers were trying to express why things often seemed such a struggle, but an innocent obedience with no decisions to make would not be humanity as far as I understand it.

Meals regularly seem to turn up in the biblical story at moments of crisis, decision and opportunity. Fasting appears as well of course, but it is meals that tend to be the focus when something important is happening. The Passover meal was the prelude to the Israelites escape from Egypt and still forms a central element in Jewish life. What the Jews would and would not eat marked them out as distinctive and gave them what they saw as a unique relationship with their God. There is probably an entirely practical reason behind the foods that were considered safe and those which were best avoided, especially in hot and hostile climates. But the food laws and sacrificial rituals provided a regular context within which the collective memories could be shared.

It was, at least according to 1 Kings 10, the food on Solomon's table that so impressed the Queen of Sheba. In Daniel 5, a thousand men are sharing in king Belshazzar's feast when he calls for Daniel to explain the writing on the wall that signals the imminent end of his reign. Many of the Psalms are associated with feasts and celebrations. The vision of prosperity in Psalm 23 talks of God preparing a dinner party for His people, which gave rise to the image of the 'heavenly banquet' to come. The rhythm of sowing, growth, harvest and eating appears repeatedly throughout the Old Testament.

But I am especially struck by how often meals and food appear in the story of Jesus. In John's gospel, his first public appearance is at a wedding reception. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, his critics draw attention to the fact that he and his disciples do not fast as proper Jews should. Indeed, they even pick ears of corn to eat on the Sabbath and have something of a reputation for over-indulgence. Then there's the feeding of the 5000; the meal at the house of Simon the Pharisee and the frequent references to salt, fish, wine and bread in the stories and teachings. The life of Jesus culminates in a supper on the night before his crucifixion. Even after his death, the sense that he was still with them is made real when he is encountered over a meal with the couple who met him on the road to Emmaus or by the sea in Galilee. It seems that there is almost nothing more typical of Jesus than eating with his friends.

So, unsurprisingly, as a result of all this, Jesus' final meal in particular has become the focus of most forms of Christian worship and liturgy. The stories (all written after the Easter experience) reflect what had already become commonplace among the believers. In doing this together they would keep both his past memory and his present reality alive, as most Christians still do. There are one or two exceptions. My Baptist heritage was rather suspicious of the rather ritualistic elements of the Eucharist.

So it put more of the emphasis on the preaching of the 'Word' and only held the 'Lord's Supper' on a more occasional basis, and in some non-conformist traditions hardly at all. I can still remember when as a child I was required to leave the room before the white cloth that covered the table at the front was removed. The idea that the 'body of Christ' was under there would have been far too much for good Baptists to stomach, but that was the rumour going round the Sunday School!

But this central focus to Christian worship can look rather exclusive. You had to be a proper church member to be allowed to participate in the communion services of my youth; they even collected a ticket from everyone who was there to keep a check on who was missing. (This must be where my professional interest in 'truancy' was born!) In other denominations you can only participate if you are confirmed, or at least baptised, into that particular tradition, though there has been some relaxation more recently and some now offer an open table.

But all of this has tended to suggest that the Jesus meal is for the self-chosen few and that outsiders are not welcome. (Some Anglicans opposed the move to Parish Eucharist as the main service on these grounds). Jesus' actual meals, by contrast, seem to have included many who were not part of his immediate circle. Even Judas was at the last one. They were often the opportunity for him to talk with those who were otherwise on the margins and form the setting for many of the parables. We are specifically told that part of his 'crime' was that he eat with tax-gatherers and sinners; he welcomed those of doubtful morals, like the woman who anointed his feet with expensive perfume. This, Jesus said, was all a taster for the coming kingdom. God's rule would be inclusive like this; or would it?

There's a magnificent painting by Veronese in the Accademia in Venice, which was originally intended by the artist to be his version of the Last Supper. The Church authorities told him to change it because the painting contained 'buffoons, drunken Germans, dwarfs and other such scurrilities', but instead he changed only the title into 'The meal at Simon's house' and no more was said. Veronese was right. Jesus appears to have been a generous host, or more accurately, to have required his hosts to accept a motley crew, not just a chosen few, along with him around their table.

The Alpha course (which I am certainly not advocating!) suggests that the first opportunity to talk about the programme should be over a proper meal, not just a mouldy biscuit and a lukewarm cup of tea. I think I'd like to pinch that idea and suggest that eating together might be a way into a more even-handed discussion with more conventional believers about the secular and humanist spirituality for which I am searching. Perhaps we will be more able to relax and treat each other as equals in that less formal setting. (Alain de Botton suggests something similar in his idea of 'agape restaurants'). Sharing food is probably also the best way to create an opportunity for feeding our minds. It's often where I have my most

stimulating conversations with friends and family, though perhaps that's just the wine talking!

But meals instead of church services, (not just as a sneaky form of recruitment to get me to go to them), would be an ideal setting for contemporary conversations about life and its core values. I would be happy for Christians to be there too as long as they don't take over! For several hundred years after the death of Jesus an *agape*-meal (or 'love feast') was the way in which the believers usually met together - until it was banned by the emerging Church bureaucracy on the grounds that it encouraged an unseemly excess. There has never been a shortage of Pharisees quick to go on pointing the finger at anything that looks too 'worldly'. Whatever would they have made of Jesus? But spectacular teas and harvest suppers still had a legendary status, at least as far as my childhood. I think they might have been onto something.

9 JOURNEYS

I could have started from here. In a sense I did, as this whole enterprise is about a journey; my own 'spiritual' adventure and a journey through the Bible to see whether it still leads me anywhere. The Bible writers were constantly recording journeys; of individuals and of whole communities. No planes and cars, and a very limited whole-world view, but travel is still a frequent theme. The more we discover about what else was going on in the ancient world at the same time, the more we have to recognise that the story of one tradition cannot be the story of the whole. There was a great deal of interplay between the nations even then, and looking outwards to those who are different, if sometimes unwillingly, is a frequent biblical theme. The rejection of a God who was only interested in 'us' was a vital discovery in making that happen. Every journey does indeed begin with the first step.

These biblical journeys often led to something entirely new. While the exiles were away in Babylon they came up against a wholly foreign culture and a very different religion. The spiritual life they developed when they came back, much more carefully thought through and far less tribal in its understanding of their God, owed its origins in part to what they had experienced while they were away. The Old Testament would not have been written as we have it without that process of risk and renewal in previously unfamiliar places. Sometimes it seems like no-one stayed where they were for long. The ancient stories of Abraham and Moses both contain mass movements across the Middle East. The first believers in the One God were nomadic; everyone was then. Moving on was a way of life, but even when tribes and nations became more settled, they often had to up sticks and move on again. Climate change, water shortages, a sense of destiny, defeat in wars, occupation and colonisation all played a part.

Certain physical locations keep cropping up. Ironically, much of the 'Holy Land' is still a matter of dispute with different groups claiming the same space. Many people feel they are away from where they would want to be, even though that inevitably brings them into conflict with others who may already see the same space as theirs. That's a very ancient human struggle. Jesus of Nazareth was continually on the move. It's there twice in the birth narratives and talking while walking seem to have been two of his most frequent activities during his ministry. But first he had to leave the comfort of his home, which had apparently been settled and safe for thirty years, if he was to follow his search for the 'kingdom of God'. It seems that he had no regular home at all after that. And the pivotal event in the Gospel story is his decision to go to Jerusalem and confront both the Jewish and the Roman authorities. A maverick Galilean who'd stayed there could easily have been ignored.

Paul's travels take up half the New Testament and ultimately helped to turn the Christian faith from only a Jewish sect into a worldwide phenomenon – even if I do see that as something of a mixed blessing. Large parts of his letters to the fledgling churches are set against the context of his missionary journeys. Thomas Cook was first formed as a Christian pilgrimage and travel service. You can still see some of the key sites, or at least the ruins of them. I have stood in the ancient city of Corinth, pretty much exactly where Paul stood. Easy enough from a cruise ship; altogether more challenging 2000 years ago, but you get some sense of the distances and difficulties involved.

I am very fortunate to have travelled as much as I have. It does indeed broaden the mind. I have been in Nelson's Mandela's cell off Cape Town; seen the Great Wall of China and the terracotta army; tracked elephants in Kenya and even climbed Uluru (Ayers Rock) in the middle of Australia when it was allowed. I have watched the sun rise in Sri Lanka, walked up the Statue of Liberty, lunched in Hemingway's bar in Havana. I have been extremely fortunate to live when I have and to have had all the opportunities I have had. I am a different person as a result.

But travel doesn't come without risks, as Jesus, Paul and those before them certainly found. Coming home to find we'd been burgled, or getting ill while away, sometimes made me wonder if it might have been better to stay at home. For years I spent much of my time on holiday worrying about the life I'd left behind. Many people do. 'Home is where the heart is' and many don't enjoy being away from it. Journeys might have to be of a different kind post-Covid. And that's not counting the seriously risky challenges that are way outside my own experience that some have to face: refugees, asylum-seekers etc. Human life often feels easier without the risk of new discovery, but sometimes it is unavoidable.

How sad then that we have turned the Bible into something that sits on a shelf or which can never be allowed to reveal something new about ourselves that we didn't know before. How tragic that so many lives, (and, I have to say, so many churches), are stuck where they have always been and that 'newness' is often seen as something to be afraid of and resisted. Sometimes however, change is thrust upon us whether we like it or not, like Paul's crisis of faith and conscience on the road to Damascus.

We may have no choice but to move on. It may be the breakdown of a relationship or the loss of a job. It may be a change of a more subtle kind, like a realisation that we can no longer live our life as it was with integrity. A dramatic move may be required. To go on living with ourselves, we may even have to stop living with someone else. The traditional Christian teaching that people have a duty to stay where they are, even if their relationships are damaging and dehumanising, is seriously misguided. That sounds much more like the rules of the old covenant again.

Moving on may be essential for love and life to prevail. Biblical people tended to travel light. They were ready for change and took the opportunity when it came. The Israelites in Egypt packed up and left when the moment came, with little or no notice and with no idea where they were going. The disciples left their nets to follow Jesus we are told, and probably left a good deal more besides, like homes, wives and children. That is a serious difficulty for people like us. When I was a student, I could pack my worldly goods into a trunk. By the time I moved house in my forties, it took two vans. We can become obsessed with 'stuff'! But after a while it all starts to hold us back, to dominate our time and attention. Then moving on becomes too difficult; we have too much to lose.

Much of the feedback I have received from my writing is from people who, like me, used to believe something, but now cannot do so, at least in the conventional sense. They identify with the spiritual journey, but the Christian map no longer helps. Their decision has sometimes been a painful one; much that was precious had to be left behind, sometimes even very special fellow-travellers. That has been my own experience too. Perhaps it would have been easier just to have stayed where we were and faked it. I genuinely wonder how many good people are still doing that because they feel that's all they can do, not because it really 'works' for them anymore.

The comments that mean the most to me are from those who are happy to affirm that they now believe in a different way. More creatively; more openly and experimentally; more bravely. The road has taken them to some new and unexpected places and they are grateful for the opportunity. But questioning our faith is hard. So is recognising the fact that we may even have to reject it and live with the consequences. The religious quest is often presented as a journey towards ever greater certainty. I cannot agree. I am clear that the longer I live the less I know for sure, but the more I have to reflect upon. My experience bank is well-stocked with virtual air-miles, but it has also led me to many places that have required me to think again and change direction.

I'm not sure that conventional faith always does that. It often seems to be more about reassurance than reassessment. The most popular forms of religion appear to be those that simply reinforce what the believer already believes and encourage them to hold fast to it. That sounds, to me at least, like a recipe for stagnation, not for moving on. It may be thought that I am lost because I no longer have a God to hold onto. I beg to differ. We will frequently have been told that doubt is a sin, or that a lack of faith is a sign of personal weakness. We may worry about what it will be like to let go – always a difficult thing to do – and about what life would be like on the other side. We may be afraid of what people will think of us if we begin to question what others take for granted. But in the end we may have no choice if we are not to become far less than the person we have the capacity to be.

We cannot stand still. Going nowhere is not an option. It's a bit like riding a bicycle; you have to keep pedalling or you'll wobble and fall off. But once you've mastered the technique, it lasts a lifetime. The journey must go on, wherever it leads. And if the map doesn't go there yet, we'll just have to update it on the way. One more (particularly wobbly) stone to go.

10 DREAMS AND VISIONS

Several of the Bible writers recorded their own or other people's dreams and visions: from Joseph's adventures near the beginning to John the Divine's Revelation at the end. These were all, in my view of course, normal dreams and individual visionary moments, not any kind of communication from an external God. It is entirely understandable that ancient people felt that they had made contact with their God in this way, but we know that dreams come from inside our brains, and our visions and hopes are part of what it means to be alive. They are not some kind of spooky film being run before our eyes by a God who is secretly trying to tell us something.

I have never entirely understood Sigmund Freud, but I am sure from my own experience that dreams somehow mop up our memories at a subconscious level and churn them out again; from 'day residues' through to information stored away that may have been untouched for years. There seems to be an element of 'defragmenting'. They probably do have something to do with sex, hormones and unexpressed emotions that have been a part of us since childhood. They also often arise from our current anxieties and the things we have been thinking about more consciously, if presented in a distorted and rather jumbled way. I have been known to wake up laughing from a dream, and sometimes the opposite. They are certainly potentially powerful and may reach down to the very centre of who we are.

But in a modern world view, dreams are a routine physiological or electrical activity that can be monitored and measured externally, not any kind of inexplicable supernatural encounter. They often lead to new ideas and new plans of action once we wake up. Much of my writing, including these essays, has first been drafted in the haze of half-sleep when a new idea has come to me that just has to be written down. I have even been known to get up and write there and then. I have obviously been thinking about it while I'm asleep, even if I wasn't aware at the time that I was doing so.

That is often also discernible as the context for the dreams that were said to have come to people in biblical times. I don't believe they were any different; their dreams grew out of what was happening to them at the time just as mine do. Joseph's dreams in Egypt arose out of what was going on around him and gave him a solution to the nation's risk of famine; that's the whole point of the story. The boy Samuel awoke to a new sense of future purpose as a man, at a time in his young life when the direction was not clear. The wise men are said to have dreamed not to go back to Herod, perhaps suspicious of his motives after their first meeting. Dreams make at least some sense, at least some of the time.

Visions are a little more complicated. In anywhere except a church, if someone came up to us and said they had seen a vision, we would probably call for an ambulance. What is the difference between a 'vision' and an hallucination, fantasy or delusion? This is certainly rather more dangerous territory. Several years ago I spent a very brief time as an in-patient in a psychiatric ward. Over those few days, numerous people told me of their visions. They had 'seen' the Angel Gabriel anointing them (or even me) as the next Messiah; or blood coming out of the taps to drown us and the grass outside growing through the windows to choke us in our beds. These sound rather like passages from the Old Testament, but this is all madness and we help no-one by not saying so. Sadly, nearly all of them carried Bibles, often open at the last book.

I wasn't sure whether to go down this particular road here, but it seems to have forced its way in. Much of the imagery in Revelation is so bizarre as to be frightening and I prefer to stay away from it. An obsessive interest is undoubtedly unhealthy. Revelation is a particular style of 'apocalyptic' writing, of which there are other examples from the ancient world, designed to be secret and obscure for only the chosen few to understand. It purports to come direct from God. I am really not at all convinced at this point in particular. Take it all as some kind of futuristic message from beyond and you have stepped over a line which leads to seeing the significance of 666 in someone's phone number or devil-inspired subliminal messages in the albums of rock artists. Interpreting it within its own time is an essential safeguard. Maybe there is a hidden reference to the Emperor Nero, though that is now disputed by some scholars. It is clearly aiming to point the finger at the Roman state but without making it too obvious.

But stretch it to predictions about contemporary events or figures and this may not be madness, but it is certainly undesirable and extremely dangerous in the wrong hands. It merely feeds the delusions of those who are really not well enough to handle it. Revelation's context reveals what Karen Armstrong calls the 'bitterness' of Johannine Christianity. We assume that the Bible writers all agreed with each other. But there was a massive argument going on at the time between those who wanted to keep the Jesus sect within mainstream Judaism and those who saw it as a radical alternative, based on a dualistic world view in which a cosmic battle was being fought between good and evil. This was John's view. As well as possible psychological factors arising from his enforced isolation, his 'visions' are grounded in fear; of the Romans, of other believers, even of his God and of the imminent end of the world. Religion based on fear is, literally, a terrible thing.

There were those who argued that Revelation should not be included in the scriptural canon and I personally rather wish they had won the day. On the other hand, I have always found it amusing when people quote from it as 'proof' that something is about to happen in our time, because 'it says in the Bible that it will be soon' – quietly ignoring the 2000 year

gap since it was written! It's been 'soon' for an awfully long time. This all risks turning faith into little more than a fairground sideshow.

My interest in the Bible's dreamers and visionaries is that their dreams made a difference to their actions and their visions gave them a hope for the future, not a sense of imminent destruction. We now use both 'dream' and 'vision' in this essentially practical way to mean virtually the same as each other. When Martin Luther King said that he had a dream for the future of black Americans, he did not mean that the hope had come to him while he was asleep. For him, and for many others, to have a dream was to have a vision and a motivation for getting there. When we talk about people of vision, we don't mean that they are seeing things. We mean that they can look beyond the present and help the rest of us to see how things might be, not just how they are.

So, for example, Jesus of Nazareth had dreams and visions, not in any supernatural sense I would say, but more in line with our modern understanding of the words. He had a dream for the rule of his God on earth in which things would be done in a very different way. He had a vision and purpose for his own life, and perhaps even for his death, that would help to bring it about. That's why I am still drawn to him, even if I cannot affirm the theology that has been built upon him. That's a good way to live; a fully human way to live.

We need dreamers and visionaries more than ever. The political mantra of 'there is no alternative' seems to have become fixed and indisputable. Of course there is always an alternative; we just don't choose to take it, for whatever reason. There is always a danger that we settle for the safe, for what is; when true human fulfilment seems to require us to push the boat out and do something that goes beyond where we are and gives us a glimpse of where we might be. We don't have to risk destroying our planet and the dreams and visions of those who can offer us another way should always be listened to. We don't have to settle for a third-class care system for our elderly people; we could abandon our costly nuclear weapons and beat our swords into ploughshares as a bold and visionary statement which I personally believe that others would then follow because they can't afford them either. We don't have to leave people feeling unwanted and deskilled; the vision of full-employment is just not the one we currently choose to prioritise.

It seems to me that the Biblical dreamers, perhaps leaving John the Divine aside for now, usually had alternatives. I suppose Joseph could have kept quiet about his dreams and not risked being thought of as getting 'above himself'. Samuel could have ignored the persistent voice in his sleep telling him it was time to grow up and move on. Jesus of Nazareth could have walked away from Gethsemane. Paul could have resisted the dissident voice in his mind telling him he was going in the wrong direction.

I could have kept these rather unconventional understandings of spirituality to myself or even gone on saying that I believed in a God when I didn't. It sounds a bit cheesy, but in the end you have to pursue your own dream and seek to make your own vision a reality. Only we can make a difference and if we always do what we have always done, we will always get what we have always had. We will constantly need people to stand up and give us a hope of something new and a way to find it. They must be people of integrity. Dreams and visions have to be tested; they can be 'vain'. But as it says in at least some translations of Proverbs 29 v.18: 'Where there is no vision, the people perish'. Amen to that.

CONCLUSION

So, time finally to reflect on the Bible as a whole rather than on one particular theme or aspect of it. The Bible still seems to open us up to intelligent reflection on how we live today, or at least it looks as though it has the potential to do so if we're willing to put it to work in a new way. But is this view of the Bible just a strategic device with no genuine basis? I accept that this way of leaving a literal reading of the Bible behind, but also letting it spur us on to new thinking in our own time, will not be something with which everyone is comfortable. It may seem that I am writing my own Bible, not reading the one that is there already. But there is often a danger that we can all create the Bible (or the Jesus) that we want and make the texts say what we want them to say.

The insights of 19th and 20th century historical and textual scholarship in particular have often been overlooked, or judged too difficult and challenging for 'ordinary' believers to cope with. As a result, the Bible has often had two distinct lives; one in the churches and an entirely different one in universities. I still remember the more earnest students on my theology degree course suggesting that lectures and seminars should begin with prayer for 'guidance', just in case anyone was tempted to put forward an opinion of their own. This did not go down well with their academic tutors!

Views about the Bible have now become somewhat entrenched and increasingly polarised. The fundamentalist 'right', especially in parts of Africa and the USA, still wants to claim the supremacy of the Bible in all things, and in ever-louder voices. Saying such things with stridency does not make them true. Winston Churchill used to write in the margins of his speeches, if he knew the point was weak, 'shout here'! To me this, as much as anything, is an abuse of the Bible; worse than anything a non-believer can do by ignoring it.

Take, for example, the never-ending debate about how the Church of England should respond to the obvious fact that some people are gay. It often comes down to a discussion about whether or not we are still tied to the views of St. Paul. Either 'that was then and this is now' or what he said counts for all time. Or we just argue what we think is right and then look for the texts to back us up! This all strikes me as extremely sterile. The Bible alone cannot be the basis of the decision today.

My own view is that once we accept that humans wrote the Bible, humans can change the way we use it. We always have done; but we must be honest and acknowledge that it is all our own doing. The various books in the Bible have always been a living, evolving thing; first over the centuries as they were being written and then over even more centuries as they were edited, translated, interpreted and used. They are a rolling

record of human religious insight at the time, not the unchangeable source of it, then or now.

Religions come from us and from our experience of seeking answers to questions in our own lives, not from an ancient book with pseudo-magical powers. Maybe the Bible is a bit like an out-of-date sat nav! The general direction of travel is still the same - finding the best way to live and a personal sense of wellbeing and meaning. Previous travellers have found it useful before us, but we have now gone beyond the boundaries of its pre-programmed map. The Bible's writings may have made sense at the time, (though they weren't by any means the only directions on offer even then), but they didn't tell the whole story and forever.

Try to follow it all to the letter and you will soon lose your way. It sends us along old roads that aren't there anymore because we've closed or upgraded them in the light of what we have discovered since. Other roads are entirely missing because they weren't built then. The route offered by conventional faith and its scriptures no longer fits with what many of us can see out of the car windows! The Bible cannot be exempt from the process of making new discoveries about ourselves. It is part of our story; for some a very important part, but not on a different plane from everything else we have ever said and done.

As long as we go on living as a species; as long as we each have to face up to what it means to be human, I cannot see how a book, frozen in its time and from such a narrow spectrum of our collective experience, can be given more than its fair share of attention as an unchangeable guide to the present. It has always had to be rewritten for a new audience. The important thing is that we do it with integrity, not try to claim that it is something it isn't.

So, let's treat it like any other historical source; useful, instructive; a glimpse into our collective past and still well worth a look. I would be less than the person I hope to be if I do not treat the Bible with respect. Others have walked across this river before me and the ancient stones still bear witness to where they found something secure to stand on. They point the way. I can even see the dents where they put their feet. But, of course, it is not the same river as it was then. We have known since Heraclitus (c.540-480 BC) that 'all things flow'. Rivers are a metaphor for life, history, religion, everything.

And just as the river is constantly changing, so are we. A little way downstream we have built a spanking new footbridge based on all the latest technology and scientific understanding that wasn't there before. That doesn't mean we should now rip the stones up, but pretending that the bridge doesn't exist, or still relying on an old map that doesn't show it, is just not possible. Surely the modern bridge can also get us to where we need to go, just as those who laid the stones originally intended? They might even think that we've improved the route and done the best we can in our time, just as they did in theirs. Until, that is, future bridge-builders

come up with an even better crossing and an even more sophisticated map. Our legacy to those who come after us can only be where we have got to so far, but then, just like us, it's up to them what they do with it.