

**The Cathedral Church of the Redeemer**  
**The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, year 'B'**  
**January 29 2012**  
**The Rev'd Leighton Lee**

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In our second lesson this morning, we are told that the people were astounded by Jesus' teaching, *for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes*. The teaching of the scribes, to which the people were accustomed, was almost wholly derivative, and consisted in repeating the opinions of their predecessors. Only they could read and interpret the scriptures. Therefore, they maintained and oversaw the traditions and history of the people and of their faith, and thus they were conservative authority figures.

But their authority was the extrinsic authority of power and force, whereas Jesus' authority was the intrinsic authority of legitimacy and charisma. He taught people to read the meaning of their own lives, and God's purpose for them. He declared that they didn't need an authority figure that acted as intermediary between God and them. He proclaimed radical and novel liberation from the constraints of past interpretations, which gave them freedom to discern God's purpose for their own lives. And people willingly went to hear him because they knew that he would tell the truth about themselves and God. People willingly went to be healed by him because they knew that he could heal them, not only of their bodily sickness, but of their soul sickness as well. People willingly followed him because they knew he would lead them down the path toward wider horizons and greater freedom. This is why he threatened those in power.

Of course, not much has changed over the centuries. Each Christian church embraces some means of extrinsic authority – each in different ways. For the Orthodox, this authority is vested in the traditions and ceremonies of the liturgy, which can never be changed. The Roman Catholic Church prefers the authority of hierarchy and dogma, and ostensibly can tell people what to believe and how to act. Protestant churches speak about the authority of the Bible, and claim this authority is absolute.

But the claims made for the Bible's absolute authority have been questioned since the nineteenth century. Those who insist that the Bible can never be questioned or tested are called Fundamentalists or Conservatives, and those who say that the Bible can – and should – be subjected to the same sorts of tests and analysis as everything else are called Modernists or Liberals. Differences of belief and approach came to a head in the 1920s and 30s in North American Protestant churches in what has come to be called the "Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy." This controversy began in the late nineteenth century and developed after the First World War. It arose in reaction against evolutionary theories, liberal theology and Biblical criticism. And it was centred on five key questions: Did Jesus perform miracles? Was he resurrected

bodily? Was his death atonement for sin? Was he born of a virgin? And, most importantly, was the Bible inerrantly inspired by the Holy Spirit?

On Sunday, May 21 1922, the brilliant preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick gave a sermon to his congregation at First Presbyterian Church in New York City. That sermon, entitled *Shall the Fundamentalists Win?*, is one of the most famous sermons ever preached, and is considered to be one of the most important documents of this controversy. Towards the end of the sermon, Fosdick said we need

*"... A clear insight into the main issues of modern Christianity and a sense of penitent shame that the Christian church should be quarrelling over little matters when the world is dying of great needs...What can you do with folks...who, in the face of colossal issues, play with the tiddlywinks and peccadilloes of religion?"*

He could have been speaking about our present situation. The Christian church is still quarrelling over little matters and the world is still dying of great needs. There are still those who claim that the authority of religion in general and the Church in particular is found between the covers of an inerrant Bible that was divinely revealed, and which must therefore be followed and obeyed, but not investigated and questioned. This approach is both pre-scientific and antediluvian. This is the approach of the scribes of Jesus' time, which is happy to be derivative and to repeat the opinions of earlier generations. However, the contemporary view of Biblical inerrancy and Divine revelation is not really the same view as that which prevailed up to the nineteenth century. As the distinguished Biblical scholar and historian Alan Richardson wrote by way of analogy,

*"Until [the nineteenth century] there was no serious alternative, short of complete scepticism, to the traditional view of revelation, just as before Copernicus it was not a rational possibility for men to adopt any alternative cosmology to the Ptolemaic. The position of a man who insists after the Copernican revolution that the sun goes around the earth is not really the same position as that of the pre-Copernican astronomers. He has in fact taken up an attitude to evidence which the pre-Copernicans had not been able to consider...His attitude to the authority of Ptolemy is quite different from theirs; for them Ptolemy was the only known standard of truth, and accepting Ptolemy did not involve rejecting Copernicus."*

A few weeks ago there was an interesting article in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, by the Oxford historian Diarmaid McCulloch in which he argued for the Church's acceptance of gay clergy. Rod Thomas, the chair of a conservative group called *Reform*, responded in a letter to the editor,

*"The question is, at the end of the day, is the Church of England willing to stick...to the Bible's teaching...There are people who argue that we need to be alongside or ahead of trends in society, but actually that is simply an argument*

*for fitting in and sanctifying what society decides it wants to do. It means the church has lost any kind of distinctive voice.”*

To which another writer responded something to the effect that the Church must accept sexual orientation, as it has accepted other things like a round earth and a heliocentric solar system, not because it is trendy and modern, but because it fits the facts.

The point I'm trying to make – using examples that were, or currently are, controversial, and which represent the tiddlywinks and peccadilloes Fosdick spoke of – is that we can't put the Bible into a separate category in which it exists without any reference to the world, the human condition, the discoveries of science or the continued working of the Spirit. The Bible does not occupy a hermetically sealed world! Nor is it a divine product that dropped down from heaven. It is a human creation written over thousands of years, and it represents the conscious and deliberate attempts of human authors and editors to wrestle with the eternal questions about God, life, death and our place in the universe. I think it's far more helpful to think of the Bible as being involved in an ongoing dialogue with humanity, rather than its being a stentorian voice from on high out-shouting all other voices.

People are fond of saying the Bible is the word of God. This is, theologically speaking, an inept statement. The word of God is Jesus – the *logos*, the Word Incarnate. Yes, the Bible contains words about God, words that help us to catch a vision of God, words that question our assumptions about God and words that comfort and console, as well as challenge. It is precious and full of great riches and wisdom, and is the indispensable and founding document of every Church, and as such it *does* have authority.

But its authority is not synonymous with infallibility, nor is it extrinsic authority. What I am trying to say is that if you take the Bible seriously, you can't take it literally. The writers of the book of Genesis envisaged the earth as a relatively flat expanse with water both above and below. This is not a scientific view, and they can't be blamed for not knowing what science has taught us. But we can be blamed if we use their ignorance to excuse our own. Why would we suspend reason, experience and conscience when we read the Bible? How can anything outwardly command us that has not already inwardly claimed us? To approach the Bible from a fundamentalist point of view is to exchange the glory of Jesus' liberating message of love and acceptance for the horror of an imprisoning message of fear, retribution and judgement. But to approach the Bible from a liberal point of view is to be claimed by it, and to see in its stories our own stories: stories of the unlovable one who is loved beyond description; of the sinful one who is perpetually redeemed; of the fallen one who is raised to eternal heights; of the uncertain one who is given confidence; of the doubting one who is given faith.

And lastly, to read the Bible in the hopes of knowing Jesus is like reading a letter from a friend about her fiancé whom we have never met. We can get an impression,

and can even begin to form a reasonable picture of what he is like, but we will never truly know him until we've met face to face. Likewise we can't truly know Jesus just through reading the Bible. It may give us some important clues, but we can only fully know him when we have met him. We meet him unexpectedly in our moments of loneliness, uncertainty, doubt and anguish as much as in our moments of companionship, confidence, faith and happiness. And however we meet him, whenever he comes, he does so not with the authority of the scribe, but with the authority of the one who teaches us by example that there is only one thing that is certain, unchanging and never-ending: the power of love.

*Bring us, Lord Jesus, to the understanding that knowing the Bible is no substitute for knowing you. Give us courage to look beyond the simplistic answers that are so often provided to the deeper truth of your love. Help us to cherish the Bible, not as the ultimate authority, but as the ultimate testimony of our forebears in faith who found new life by knowing you. And help us as we journey along the pathway of faith to sense your guiding hand and sustaining love. Amen.*