

Anglicans and Scripture

(sermon by Dr. Jonathan Inkpin on John 6.56-69, 26 Aug 2012)

What do you think is the main difference between Muslims and Christians? The answer is: the significance we give to Jesus as the Christ, the bearer of salvation. And what do you think is the main difference between Jews and Christians? The answer is: the significance we give to Jesus as the Christ, the bearer of salvation. And what do you think is the main difference between Buddhists and Christians? You guessed it: the significance we give to Jesus as the Christ. There are, we have discovered, many things on which Christians can find common agreement with people of other faiths, and none. We can, for instance, be moved by a number of things in others' approaches to life: by the hospitality and generosity of the Pure Land Buddhists here in Toowoomba for example. We can even find some similarities in some areas of belief and practice. And we can certainly unite, and must unite today, in working for peace and justice, and caring for our planet Earth. Yet, when we come to Jesus, we part company, don't we? For the God of Jesus Christ is the source, centre and sanctifier of Christian lives: *nothing* else is as important to us as this. Christians may have our differences, but all of us are united in fellowship by this common commitment to Jesus as Lord: that is, to Jesus as *the* most important thing in life.

Jesus is Lord: that is to say, in the words of the first followers of Jesus, in our Gospel reading today, 'we have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.' Wow! That is some affirmation, isn't it? Yet, as Christians, we know it affirms the source, the centre and sanctification of our lives. So, 'does this offend you?', asks Jesus in our Gospel reading today. He was talking to his disciples about his teaching. 'Does this offend you?' Jesus was well aware that his teaching, and his actions, challenged

people. And they still challenge us today, don't they?! Anything that really matters *does* challenge us. Anything, and anyone, that calls us into a deeper understanding of life, challenges us. Anything, and anyone, that helps us love and helps us to be loved: above all, *these* challenge us, don't they?! And so it is with the God of Jesus. God really does challenge us, if we really let Jesus into our hearts and lives. No wonder then, as our Gospel tells us, that many people stopped following Jesus. His life-giving teaching, and his love-bearing actions, really challenged them. Those who stayed however found that they could not leave. As the disciple Peter put it, 'Lord, to whom can we go? *You* have the words of eternal life?'

Now Peter's words are very important. Jesus, he is saying, is the word of life. Note well, it is Jesus who is this Word of God, not the Bible. Sometimes we *do* refer to the holy scriptures as the Word, but, strictly speaking, the scriptures only point us, or open us, to the true Word of God, which is Jesus Christ himself. That is another difference we have with most Muslims and Orthodox Jews. For them, their holy scriptures, the Qu'ran and the Torah, *are* the Word of God: the Word of God itself, not just ways *to* God. That's why Muslims and Jews treat the Qu'ran and the Torah with such reverence, not putting them on the ground, and touching them only with kid gloves. Christian scriptures are not quite the same.

There is indeed a good deal of nonsense often talked today about the scriptures. For a start, we tend to call the scriptures 'the Bible', as if it were one, simple, and continuous book. Now we could never have done that before the age of printing, just a few hundred years ago. For of course, for most of the Christian centuries, what we call 'the Bible', was actually 'scriptures': that is to say, things which were written. For 'the Bible' is of course not one book, but a collection of a great many different books, or manuscripts. And these scriptures were written at a great variety of different times,

in a great variety of different places, in a great variety of different genres. So we have some scriptures, or books of the Bible, which are poetry. Others are collections of ancient religious laws. Some are like history, though mixed up with theology. Others are like ancient types of biography. Some are letters. Still others are very different, like the great visions of the book of Revelation. Truly the scriptures, the books of the Bible, constitute an amazingly varied cultural library. And the scriptures are indeed a vital, holy, and powerful means to know God. But they are *not* one book, with a single meaning, which is easy for anyone to grasp and pass on to others. They are not a textbook, full of straightforward rules and answers. Rather they *are* many books of many different kinds, which are immensely rich and *multi-layered* in meaning: a meaning of which no one can ever really grasp much more than a little. They are a treasure trove of inspiration: full of deep truths.

The week before last, our Archbishop asked all the clergy of the diocese to attend a clergy conference to look at the vital issue of 'Passionate Spirituality through the Scriptures.' For, as our Natural Church Development surveys have shown, across our diocese, we Anglicans are typically *not* very passionate about the scriptures. So, thanks be to God, the diocese is now encouraging us all to do something about it. Can *we*, do you think, together, commit *ourselves* to learning more about the scriptures and reading them regularly, and more deeply, day by day? This is our Archbishop's challenge to us this year. It is one which I hope we will take up: happily, if not passionately, in the weeks and months to come.

On one level, you know, it *is* a very odd thing that Anglicans are *not* passionate about the scriptures. For there are some strong arguments to say that the Anglican Church is *the* most bible-based church of all. Does that surprise you? If so, just check out most other churches. I don't think you will find that the books of holy

scripture are often so deliberately placed, as they are in Anglican churches, right up front, constantly to remind us of their importance. And I don't think that you will find that other churches read quite as much scripture as we do, each Sunday, and every day in between. Take a look at your pew sheet. You have *four* pieces of scripture there, every week. Come to morning prayer, or midweek eucharists, and you will hear more. Then look at our prayer book and see how our worship is, *all of it*, based on the scriptures. Even our hymns and songs are usually far more scripturally based than many others sung elsewhere.

So what is the problem for Anglicans with the scriptures? Well, perhaps part of the issue is that we don't actually *celebrate*, and *use*, the very *rich* way in which Anglicans interpret the scriptures. For, since the English Reformation, Anglicans have, rightly, always insisted that the scriptures do not stand alone. Rather they are always to be interpreted by what theologians call the apostolic Tradition, and by what they call Reason, which includes all that is good in human experience, science and understanding. For the Roman Catholic Church favours church Tradition as its real authority in Christian faith. In reaction, Protestant Churches tend to say that Scripture is the *only* authority. In frustration at such narrowness, some liberal Christians then claim Reason as the main authority. We Anglicans say that true authority lies in *all* of them, and in *none* of them *alone*. Scripture, Reason *and* Tradition: *together*, these three form a stronger 'threefold cord' to help us know Jesus. Each of the three are problematic on their own. For none are Jesus in themselves. Only together do they draw us deeper to Jesus and eternal life. So don't leave the scriptures out of *your* life, and don't stop asking questions: *use* Reason and *relate* the scriptures to the historic Tradition of the Church. Take up the challenge. Let God in Jesus disturb you. And thereby hear the words of eternal life. In Jesus' name. Amen.