

**Archbishop Blanch Memorial Lecture  
November 2014**

**The Book of Life: the Bible as a means of grace**

**Introduction**

Let me begin by saying what an honour it is to be asked to deliver the lecture this evening. Although I never met Archbishop Blanch, whose public ministry had just ended when I began training for ordination, I was very aware of his influence in the 70s and 80s. And I share with him at least one thing – and that’s a particular love, within the Bible, for the Hebrew Scriptures. So I count it a great privilege to be speaking to you tonight. But I do admit that there have been moments during this last week when I wish I’d accepted, instead, the invitation to deliver the brief word of welcome which is required at the Archbishop Blanch School prize giving – which is taking place at our Cathedral, this every evening.

I’ve chosen to address a topic which is very dear to me, and which I regard as an important one for the church today, at least in Britain. The title, which I suspect would have brought an approving smile to the face of Stuart Blanch, is *‘The Book of Life: the Bible as a means of grace’*. May I clarify, however, that I have taken the phrase *‘the Book of Life’* from *the Revelation to John*, where it occurs four times. I did **not** borrow it from the recently released animated film for children, distributed by Twentieth Century Fox, and currently showing in a cinema near you; although the publicity blurb for the film says: *‘The Book of Life encourages us to celebrate the past while looking forward to the future’* and that just about

works as a strapline for my lecture too.

So: *'The Book of Life: the Bible as a means of grace'*. The topic is dear to me, because the Bible is dear to me. And the Bible is dear to me because over the course of more than 40 years, it has been in the act of daily Bible reading that I have most often and most reliably met with God. Of course, I have known the presence of God in other ways, in song and prayer, in bread and wine, in great beauty (whether in nature, literature, music or art), in human relationships, especially with those closest to me, in times of extreme joy and even, maybe not least, in times of great sadness. But day to day, I've met with God (by which I mean, I've heard his voice, felt his love, found his guidance, known his Spirit's closeness) most often and most dependably in and through the Bible; so the Bible is dear to me because the Lord is dear to me and because he's consistently drawn near to me in my reading of this book. For over 40 years, then, the Bible has been a Book of Life to me and a means of grace and I treasure it.

As those of you who have heard me speak on other occasions will perhaps have heard me say, one of the things I love most about the Bible is the fact that although it is of course always more than carefully crafted literature, it is seldom less than that. May I say that again? Although the Bible is of course **always // more** than carefully crafted literature, it is seldom less than that. I delight to stumble upon a piece of literary genius in the Bible which is new to me.

Let me briefly offer you three examples of the kind of crafted-ness I mean. It's often evident in the way that an entire book of Bible has been structured – the Book of Ruth is a good example, though a similar degree

of skilful arrangement is evident in plenty of other books, including Job and Esther. Here's the way that works out in the Book of Ruth. The plot unfolds in six scenes, which are symmetrical – or 'chiastic' to use the technical term: scene 1 comprises the first five verses of chapter 1 – and tells how a family line ended. It is mirrored by scene 6, at the end of the book, in chapter 4, verses 13-22, which tells how a new family line was begun. Scene 2 is verses 6 to 22 of chapter 1, and tells of the loyalty of Ruth to Naomi; and it's mirrored by scene 5 in chapter 4, verses 1-12, which tells of the loyalty of Boaz to Naomi. And the middle two scenes also mirror each other: scene 3, in chapter 2, features Ruth and Boaz in the harvest field – where the action takes place outdoors, in the daytime and in public; and scene 4, in chapter 3, features Ruth and Boaz on the threshing floor – where the action takes place indoors, at night-time and in private. Beautiful, isn't it?

Sometimes an equivalent crafted-ness is evident in a single chapter of the Bible. Many of the individual Psalms demonstrate this; but one of my favourite examples is the first chapter of Luke. After four verses of introduction, in which the evangelist twice states his intention to provide an orderly account, we get four very orderly stories. The first is an annunciation, featuring the Angel Gabriel and the priest Zechariah in Jerusalem; that's followed by a second annunciation, again featuring the Angel Gabriel, but this time with the Virgin Mary in Nazareth. Then comes a second story about Mary, featuring a speaking part for Elizabeth (the wife of Zechariah), which climaxes in a great song sung by Mary (often called 'the *Magnificat*'), and that's followed, finally, by a second

story about Zechariah, again featuring a speaking part for Elizabeth, which climaxes in another great song, sung this time by Zechariah (often called the *Benedictus*). So there are two stories about Zechariah, first and last (which are both about the significance of John the Baptist), and two stories about Mary sandwiched in between (which are both about the significance of Christ Jesus). The first two are stories about Gabriel, and the second two feature Elizabeth and climax in songs, or canticles. Ssee how carefully crafted it is?

And finally, thirdly, the crafted-ness is sometimes evident on a still smaller scale, in the arrangement of a single paragraph or a set of verses in the Bible; not least in the books of the Old Testament prophets and in the letters of St Paul. Here's an unlikely example from Numbers 9.15-23. It's prose, but it's almost poetry. The eight verses fall into three parts, each of which concludes with something like a refrain.

So in verses 15 to 18a, the basic principle is established, that the movement of the Israelites in the wilderness was determined by the movement of the fiery cloud over the tabernacle: when it stayed put, so did the Israelites; when it moved, so did they, and the first section ends: *'At the command of the LORD the Israelites would set out, and at the command of the LORD they would camp'*.

In verses 18b to 20, the point is introduced that this pattern held good whether the period in which the cloud remained in one place was short or long. And this middle section ends *'and according to the command of the LORD they would remain in camp; then according to the command of the LORD they would set out'*.

And the point that the intervals between Israel's journeyings might be long or short is reiterated in verses 21-23. But the third section ends not just with that refrain, by saying *At the command of the LORD they would camp, and at the command of the LORD they would set out*, but with an extra, climactic reference to the command of the LORD, which serves to give real emphasis to the leadership, in the whole process, of Moses. It all builds to the last word of verse 23, Moses. Clever, isn't it? The crafting turns out to be a rhetorical device. My wife Cathy says this is a classically dull bit of the Bible; but the fact is, that even in this most unpromising corner of our Scriptures, we discover literature carefully crafted to achieve an effect.

I could go on in this vein all night, but you get the point: part of what I love about the Bible is the sheer beauty of it as a literary text. And I do believe this crafted-ness is part of the way in which it mediates grace to us, part of the way in which it takes effect as a means of grace. I'll come back to that point later.

But over the years I have come gradually and somewhat reluctantly to the conclusion that my passion and my experience of Bible reading are not universal. I have had to acknowledge that not every Christian is in the habit of reading the Bible every day, but also that not every Christian who does read the Bible daily, finds it rich and uplifting. Many Christians are highly disciplined in their habit of Bible reading, and yet do not find it enriching or life-giving, at least not routinely.

What worries me is that I suspect that there's a trend here: I suspect I'm more out of the ordinary in this experience now than I would've been

in church circles twenty, fifty and a hundred years ago. I'd go as far as to say that once upon a time, my experience of the Bible as a means of grace was normal – listen, for example, to this beautiful poem, published as a preface to the Geneva Bible – an early English translation of Scripture – in 1561:

*Here is the spring, where waters flow to quench our heat of sin;  
Here is the tree where truth doth grow to lead our lives therein.  
Here is the balm to heal the strife where men's devices fail;  
Here is the bread that feeds the life that death cannot assail.  
The tidings of salvation dear, comes to our ears from hence;  
The fortress of our faith is here and shield of our defence.*

*Then be not like the hog that hath a pearl at his desire;  
Yet takes more pleasure in the trough and wallows in the mire.  
Read not this book in any case but with a single eye:  
Read not but first beseech God's grace to profit all thereby.  
Then happy thou in all thy life what so to thee befall  
Yea, doubly happy shalt thou be when God through death thee call.*

I think we can take it that 450 years ago, these sentiments enjoyed a wide resonance in the experience of a generation just discovering access to the Bible in its own mother tongue. But I suspect it was this same experience to which Stuart Blanch himself was referring when he described the Bible as '*a book which is meant... to put a spring in our step and a song in our hearts*'.

Yet it seems to me that in the forty years or so since he wrote those words, in the introduction to his little book *For all Mankind*, the experience of the Bible as a means of grace has become dangerously close to exceptional.

There are doubtless two reasons for this. On the one hand, there has been a loss of familiarity with the contents of the Bible; on the other, a loss of confidence in its trustworthiness. Both are cultural phenomena, of course, in the sense that they are characteristic of society as a whole and not just of church. The loss of both familiarity and confidence are well documented, and I surely don't need to argue the case for them here; but I would like to comment briefly on my experience of them.

Let me say a word about the loss of familiarity first. Cathy, my wife, who lectures in a university English department, is occasionally called upon to provide students with a crash course in Biblical theology and imagery, because their unfamiliarity with Scripture renders them unable to appreciate or interpret great English literature – not just the writings of TS Eliot, say, or John Milton; but that of Shakespeare and Dickens, of DH Lawrence and even PG Woodhouse.

This is because, as we're all aware, small children don't necessarily hear Bible stories at primary school any more, and most aren't at Sunday school to hear them there; and while older children are still required to take RS at GCSE, the bible story content is usually lamentably thin, and pupil interest largely depends on the rather random quality of the teaching; so unlike their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents, most adults today just don't have the Bible as a standard reference point.

I remember, as a parish priest in Walsall in the West Midlands in 2004, when Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*, was on general release, visiting a couple who had enquired about a baptism. The man was mocking his girlfriend because she'd burst into tears at the end of the

film – why? Because she truly had not expected Jesus to die. Nothing in her upbringing had prepared her for his death, and fuelled by Hollywood cliché, she was watching the crucifixion in earnest expectation that at any moment, Harrison Ford or Bruce Willis-style, he would escape from the cross and beat up his enemies. She just didn't know the story. Of course, that pastoral conversation had a happy ending: her unfamiliarity with the Gospels meant she was also unfamiliar with the resurrection and I was able to tell her the good news. That was ten years ago.

This degree of cultural unfamiliarity with the content of the Bible is no doubt linked to the loss of confidence in it. Part of the reason why the Bible no longer has a central place in most schools and colleges is because its authority is no longer taken for granted. Of course, few establishment institutions have found their authority unquestioned in the last 50 years; and thank God for that. In this respect, the challenges the Bible has had to face since the 60s are no different from those which other authorities have had to face, including the police, the Crown, and even the BBC. To this extent, it's probably a good thing. I'm not sure the Bible can actually serve as a means of grace if it is given unthinking obedience and unquestioned assent.

But the result is that the Bible has become a contested book, inside the church as well as out. I fear the squabbles which have blighted the face of the church like an acute and chronic case of acne over the last thirty years, have contributed significantly: as we have traded bible texts like punches in our conflicts over gender and sexuality, women bishops and gay clergy, confidence in the Bible has dwindled, affection for the

Bible has evaporated. No-one wants to spend longer than absolutely necessary in a conflict zone. Partly as a result of these endless arguments, many people have become sceptical about the content of Scripture; and some are downright hostile to it.

Probably (though this would be hard to demonstrate) this loss of confidence at least partly explains why the Bible occupies a less central place in church worship today than it used to do. In churches where the worship is formal, liturgical and choral, it was normal to find, 30 years ago, the sort of saturation in Scripture which you generally only find now in Cathedrals and greater churches: at any Sung Eucharist or Choral Evensong, Bible reading is heaped upon Bible reading and even the liturgical framework is biblical.

But perhaps more surprising is the fact that in churches where the worship is more informal and contemporary, many of which would be regarded as Evangelical, it is not unheard of nowadays for the service to have no Bible reading. Oh, the Bible will no doubt be quoted, not least by the preacher; but there may well be no single moment in the act of worship when the people of God are listening together, attentively and intentionally, to the reading of the Word of God. It's a situation I've personally encountered twice in the last twelve months. Such a thing was unimaginable 30 year ago.

Of course, a reduced public reading of Scripture must inevitably result in a reduced familiarity with Scripture – and a downward spiral is created. For that reason I take the subject of this lecture to be an important one. Of course, I'm not going to reverse that trend overnight;

but I hope that at least for those of us gathered here this evening, I can put a marker in the ground. This lecture is a plea to resist at all costs any further erosion of our familiarity with and confidence in the Bible in our own personal devotions and (insofar as we are able to influence this) in public worship.

So, what I'm proposing to do in the next half an hour is to look first at the case against the Bible. I want to acknowledge the difficulties that many people have with the Scriptures, New Testament as well as Old, which makes the Bible seem more like a Book of Death to them than a Book of Life; then secondly, I want to mount a positive case, and to state how in spite of the problems, I find the Bible to be a means of grace which the church neglects at its peril: I want to offer a model for reading the Bible with integrity, expecting God to draw near in and through it in spite of the difficulties – that's to say: I'll suggest a particular way reading of the Bible which I take to be appropriate to it as a means of grace. In that section I'll be trying to explore how we might follow in the footsteps of Stuart Blanch who, according to Dick Williams, '*studied the Scriptures with academic rigour, but read them as life-giving literature*'. Then at the end, by way of conclusion, I want to offer a worked example: that could be the boldest, or most foolish, part of the whole lecture: I want to read a text of Scripture with you and savour it as a means of grace.

## **The Case against the Bible**

Let me begin with the case against the Bible. Some of you will, like me, have found yourself now and then (if only at a baptism, wedding or

funeral) at worship in the company of someone who is not a Christian in any lively sense. And then an unfortunate passage of the Bible is read out, and you find yourself wincing inwardly, because you know that the words being proclaimed are not, barring a miraculous divine intervention, going to warm your companion to your faith. If that's a scenario you recognise, then you'll agree that the Bible is, at least now and then, a scandal, in the true sense of the Greek word; it is a stumbling block, an obstacle to mission.

There are perhaps six categories of material in the Bible which are likely to scandalise those outside the church. Working up from the 'only mildly off-putting' to the 'downright shocking', these are:

First, the passages of the Bible that are simply dull or opaque: I might love the Letter of Jude, or the first nine chapters of the Book of 1 Chronicles even (and I do), but without considerable interpretation, they're inaccessible to most people and therefore can often feel like a liability rather than an asset to us. Bits of the Bible can seem irrelevant.

Secondly, and a little more problematically, there are passages which are anachronistic and culturally alien. Think of all that imagery about horned beasts and apocalyptic horsemen in Revelation; or the concepts associated with the sacrificial system in Exodus, and especially all that blood; or in the letters of Paul those bits about women at worship having to keep their heads covered and men not being permitted to have long hair. Again, without considerable interpretation, these passages are a turn off for most people, not a turn on. Bits of the Bible can seem outdated.

Thirdly, there are passages which are apparently contradictory, or at least inconsistent – where one passage says David killed Goliath, another says Elhanan son of Ja'are-oregim did it; where Genesis 1 says humankind was created after the animals, Genesis 2 says the reverse. Discrepancies like these aren't usually a great difficulty to those of us who are believers, but to the outsider, at least if the texts are not interpreted, it presumably doesn't increase confidence in our sacred text. Indeed, when we talk about the Bible, do we mean the Protestant Bible or the Catholic Bible? -- because the contents are not the same. And when we talk about Mark's Gospel or the Book of Psalms, which version, which manuscript, do we mean? – because those are not consistent either. Bits of the Bible can seem unreliable; and here the historical-critical method, which has prevailed in academic theology since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century has definitely contributed to a loss of confidence in the reliability of the sacred text.

Fourthly, and more problematically again, there are passages which function divisively, or exclusively. For example, I was in York Minster last month for the consecration of two new Bishops, one of whom happens to be a particularly respected figure in Jewish and Moslem circles. Because of this there were several imams and rabbis present at the consecration – which made the reading during the service of these words, from the Gospel of John, seem (to me at least) like a poor choice of a Bible reading: *'The Jews then disputed among themselves saying, 'How can this mean give us his flesh to eat?' So Jesus said to them, 'Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you'.* Hearing those words, as it were through the ears of a rabbi sitting

close by, made me freshly aware that bits of the Bible can seem intolerant.

And that brings us to the last two categories, which I regard as most problematic of all. The first is the way the Bible can function, or can seem to function, or can be made to function, oppressively. Most notoriously, it did so in the past in relation to slaves – but many witnesses testify that it continues to do so today, or at least can continue to do so, with respect to women, to gay people, or to Palestinians, and equally, ironically, to Jews, to highlight just a few of the most obvious categories. Do you know this most damning of judgments by Peter Tatchell, the veteran gay rights campaigner? In the year 2000 he said, *The Bible is to gays what Mein Kampf is to Jews*. That's a pretty hostile statement, isn't it? And while Christians (including gay Christians) may want to object to that, it's sobering to note how little offence his remarks provoked in society at large at that time. That's because bits of the Bible can seem oppressive.

But finally, and most damningly, the Bible can seem to legitimate violence. It's not hard to find passages of Scripture in which God acts punitively and even capriciously and in a ways which give encouragement to the perpetrators of violence, terrorism, or holy war. Think of God's commandment to Saul, for example, in 1 Samuel 15, to slaughter the Amalekites. *'Go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey'*. It's fair to say that on these grounds the Bible is regarded by many as a sinister book these days, capable of easy abuse by fundamentalists and Christian militants. It's perceived in

the same way perhaps as many Christians perceive the Koran: with a certain amount of fear and suspicion. Bits of the Bible can seem vicious.

So, whereas once upon a time the Bible was an acknowledged asset in the mission of the Church, the situation is now more complicated and may have been reversed. It may be that the Bible has now become a net-liability in our culture.

The author who has managed to capture this 'Bible as liability' most memorably is undoubtedly Richard Dawkins. His book *The God Delusion* is in all honesty a pretty poor piece of scholarship; but there's no denying the colourfulness of the rhetoric. Here's the line in the book which has been most often quoted:

*'The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully' (p.31).*

The same point has been made more thoughtfully by others. In a recent book on 'the Bible as problematic for theology', Robert Carroll, a fine Old Testament scholar, has said: *'If reading the Bible does not raise profound problems for you as a modern reader, then check with your doctor and enquire about the symptoms of brain death'.*

And there's this, from a thoroughly helpful essay by Ellen F Davis, (p. 177): *'This is, or should be, the scandal of every introductory Bible course in seminary and in parish: the Bible is chock full of embarrassing, offensive and internally contradictory texts, texts we do not wish to live with, let*

*alone live by*'. Texts we would not wish to live with, let alone to live by.

## **Strategies for Bible Reading**

What are we to say, in the light of these difficulties? They are not easily answered and cannot reasonably be overlooked. Do we follow the example of Sir Ian McKellen who is on record as saying that whenever he comes across a Bible, in a hotel room or theatre, he tears out of it the page which includes Leviticus 18.22, '*You shall not lie with a male as with a woman, it is an abomination*'. Shall we just snip out the Scriptures we don't care for?

I keep a copy of the Bible on my iPad. I keep it as a word-file, so that I can annotate it: I can include notes and observations on the text; I can highlight things or add cross references. But when people see me using it, I sometimes joke that the real advantage of having the Bible in this form is that I can delete the bits with which I don't agree.

But this solution is problematic. Which texts would we excise and who decides? In the second century Marcion recommended a drastic version of this solution, which I fear many Christians today have adopted in practice: he proposed that we simply jettison the Old Testament. God forbid.

But if we attempt a more subtle version of this plan it remains tricky, for this reason: Christians a hundred years ago would not choose the same texts as ourselves and Christians a hundred years from now will twitch at texts which cause us no difficulty today. Christians in the global south have no difficulty with some of the texts that cause us most anxiety

– that, in part, is what is causing the Anglican Communion such trouble at present.

At the very least, the ongoing usefulness of controversial texts is to help us identify the particular values – and neuroses – of our own culture. As Hugh Pyper puts it, *'We **should** be scandalized by the Bible. Only then is there any chance that we might be taking it seriously. Acknowledging its dangerous offensiveness is the first step to wondering whether the root of the offence lies in ourselves or in the text'* (*An Unsuitable Book*, p.2).

So, I regard that option as a cul-de-sac. But then how can the difficulties be negotiated? My solution is two-fold. And here I want to move into the constructive part of my lecture. The first step in my solution is a caveat; the second step is a positive strategy.

### **A Caveat: the doctrine of accommodation**

My caveat is this: we have to recognise that that all Scripture is contingent. This is bound to sound theologically slippery – but it is inescapably true: all God-talk is by definition provisional. It has to be: God is infinite and eternal, and human language can really only do justice to what is within time and space; so human language about God is never absolutely or finally true. It can't be, just because it is human language. Even to say, 'God is love' (which is the truest possible thing that we might say about God) is to compromise God by attributing to him a quality that we can inevitably understand only in human terms. When God reveals himself in human language, he limits himself just as he did when he revealed himself in human flesh. When God became incarnate, when he

put himself into human flesh, he necessarily compromised his capacity, for example, to be everywhere at once. When God puts himself into human words, the same sort of limitation happens.

My great theological hero, John Calvin, went as far as to say – and this might surprise you – that in the Bible God *'lisps with us as nurses are won't to do with infants'*. He meant that Scripture is like God's baby-talk. Imagine you have an infant in your arms and you want to make it smile. You could try quoting to it the Tim Vine joke which was voted best one-liner of the year at the Edinburgh Fringe this summer – *'I've decided to sell my old Hoover; well, it was just gathering dust'*. But the infant is not going to get it. You have a better chance of raising a smile from the baby simply by leaning towards it and saying *goo goo goo, gah gah*. Calvin understood that even the truest bits of the Bible are God's *goo goo goo gah gah* to speak his Word to us in a form fitted to our limited capacity. The posh theological term for this is accommodation. In Scripture, God has accommodated himself to us. He has done so, by grace. If he had spoken his Word in its essence, it would have been beyond our capacity to comprehend it. That's my caveat. If even a statement like 'God is love' is really only an approximation to the truth, fitted to our limited capacity, well, it relieves at least a little, the pressure on those more problematic texts in the Bible. Even the problematic bits of the Bible, in other words, testify to God's extraordinary grace, because it is especially in those passages that we see the extent to which God has stooped down to us. He has taken the risk, by grace, even of appearing to collude with our sinfulness.

## **A proposal: Faithful Learning as a Hermeneutical Stance**

And that brings me to my positive strategy, which is an attempt to articulate a way of reading the Bible which is appropriate to it as a means of grace. If Stuart Blanch is right to assert that *'the Bible rests on the assumption that God speaks'*, (*The World our Orphanage*, p7) how shall we read it in such a way as to give ourselves the best possible chance of hearing the Word of God in it? Because that's what I take the phrase 'a means of grace' to denote, where the Bible is concerned. The Scriptures function as a means of grace when they mediate God to us, when they disclose the Word of the Lord to us. How then can we put ourselves in the way of this grace, // in the way of the Word of the Lord?

There's a very helpful book by Robert Evans, called *Using the Bible: Studying the Text*, in which he cites (p 4) the late Bishop JAT Robinson's suggestion that there are only four kinds of Bible reader. These are:

first *the foolish cynics* – they are the scoffers who come to the text predisposed to find fault with it, expecting to find nothing worthwhile, and who are bound to get what they are looking for.

Secondly, Robinson describes *the fearful fundamentalists*, who refuse to acknowledge the kind difficulties I've been trying to articulate in this lecture and whose default response is simply, 'God is God and can do as he likes'. If God wants to slaughter people, where's the problem? For them, the biblical text is perfect. If it offends you, then the imperfection is in you, not in the text.

Thirdly, there are *the committed conservatives* – a category, I confess, in which, I almost recognise myself; these are the readers who

**are** prepared to use their brains, who **are** prepared to engage with critical questions about the Bible, but whose instinct is always to defend the text and who, no matter what the question, will predictably offer an orthodox answer.

Finally, Robinson describes *the wise sceptics* – which is the category in which I suspect he recognised himself! These are those who come at the text apparently without any particular agenda, open-minded about answers to the questions and seeking to be led only by the evidence. It sounds very plausible, but a really wise sceptic knows there is no such starting position of neutrality, there's no-one who truly comes to the text without any agenda, without prejudices, or presuppositions, or cultural bias.

So this evening I want to propose a fifth category of Bible readers, the readers most likely to experience the Bible as a Book of Life and as a means of grace. These are *the faithful learners*. Both the adjective and the noun are important and I'll unpack them in turn.

Let me start with the adjective. The word 'faithful' implies at least three things here.

First, it implies a sincere and enduring commitment to the text; a loyalty to it and fidelity to it. It does seem to me that the most fruitful Bible reading, the most lively and life-giving, is likely to be done by those who love it, who have a mature commitment to the Bible, and a long-standing affection for it.

There is an analogy here with human relationships. In an immature relationship, an insecure one, there is often a refusal to admit that the

loved one is capable of doing anything wrong, a refusal ever to see the loved one's behaviour as problematic or inadequate; but it is equally the mark of an immature relationship, if, at the first sign of the loved one's weakness or frailty, the relationship is thrown aside with a great flouncing out and slamming of the door. In a mature relationship, where there is a genuine loving commitment, and especially where the relationship has been sustained over a long time, there is readiness both to acknowledge any difficulties, and to work at them. In a relationship, it is often in that faithful 'dwelling with difficulty' that a new and deeper understanding comes, issuing in a renewed and still more profound love.

So it is with faithful Bible reading too. Faithful learners cherish the Bible. They are the ones most likely to savour the sheer literary craftedness of Holy Scripture (of the kind with which this lecture began and will finish) because they love it. And the features they cherish then become part of the dynamic by which the Bible mediates the grace of God to them. They are the ones who will struggle longest and hardest over the most problematic passages in the Bible, because of their loyalty to it. And then even the difficulties become part of the dynamic by which the Bible mediates the grace of God to them. They are those who are able to echo from the heart the exclamation of the Psalmist: *'Oh how I love thy law... How sweet are thy words to my mouth!'*, and for that reason, I believe, the ones who love this book are the ones who are best placed to hear the Word of the Lord in it, and to experience it as a means of grace.

But as that quotation from the Psalms perhaps suggests, faithful learners have not just a relationship to the text, a loyalty to and love for

the Bible; they have a relationship with the God behind the text. It is 'thy' law, 'thy' words which we love. Faithful learners know themselves to be in relationship to a Divine **Thou**. Indeed, it is on a prior loyalty to, and a love for, God that the loyalty to and love for the biblical text rests. And of course, that loyalty to and love for God in turn rest on a sense of his prior loyalty to and love for us, manifest in Christ Jesus.

Secondly then, I am proposing that for the Bible to function as a Book of Life and as a means of grace it is necessary for the readers to be aware of themselves in relation to God. It is possible we can identify the moment the Bible became a means of grace for Stuart Blanch. In *The World our Orphanage* (p23), he describes how, as a young man in the RAF during the war, he spent one particular Christmas week on duty at his guard station, when most of his peers were on leave. There being little else to do, he spent the time reading the Gospels several times. *'I read them with a great sense of responsibility and under a curious sense of pressure. I had no commentary, yet this strange book spoke, its words glowed on the page, and I knew from that moment that my life was bound up, for better or worse, with the Man whose life is described there'*.

That sense of pressure, that sense of responsibility, that sense of the words glowing on the page: they all testify to a sense of the relationship of the reader not just to the text, but to the God beyond the text.

But this sense of relationship means, thirdly, that faithful learners bring to their Bible reading a specific expectation that it will be to them a Book of Life and a means of grace. That's to say, if the Bible rests on the assumption that God speaks; and if the readers know themselves to be in

relationship to this speaking God; then the readers will expect this God to speak **to them**. Faithful learners expect to be personally addressed by the 'Thou' whose word the Bible is. They come to the text of Scripture with a disposition of trust and dependence – and an intentional open-ness to the Spirit of God.

So much for the adjective, for reading the Bible **faithfully**; but the noun is important too. The word 'learners' implies at least four things.

First (and most obviously) it implies a readiness and an eagerness to acquire new insights and perspectives; it implies curiosity and an appetite for discovery. Learners (which, after all, just means 'disciples'), are those who are, in the words of a famous puritan pastor, *'verily persuaded that the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth from his holy Word'*. It is characteristic of the faithful learner to conclude a Bible reading with the words, 'Well, I've never noticed that before'. The learner is a reader constantly on the look-out for something never previously observed.

Secondly, the word learner implies a readiness and an eagerness to acquire new skills. You see, faithful learners know that Bible reading is an art, which like every art requires diligent practice; it's something we get better at, the more we invest in it. It is something to be mastered. So a faithful learner will take scholarship seriously, will be curious about the original languages in which the biblical texts were written, and about the historical cultures to which they were written, and will be open to finding new tools with which to interpret the text.

I forget who it was who said, 'I like to find out I was wrong: it's the only way I can grow and develop'. Faithful learners understand that there

is scope, in Bible reading, just as there is in any worthwhile discipline, to learn by our mistakes, from our mis-readings. Personally, for example, I don't read the biblical material about the role of women in church the same way now as I did in 1980; and that's not because I've capitulated to a set of unbiblical social values; it's because I've become more sensitive to the Bible. I have learned to read the Bible better.

Thirdly, the word 'learners' implies an open-ness to others. That's to say, the plural is important. The Bible is at its most effective as a Book of Life and a means of grace when the reading of it is done in community. The appropriation of Scripture must be a personal enterprise for each one of us, but it isn't a private enterprise. It has to be done in dialogue, with partners. The Bible is the book of the Church – and not just of the local congregation, but of the global church; and not just of the church of today. We need also to be listening to those who have gone before us in the way of Christ. The church is a place of negotiation on the one hand, and a place of accountability on the other. The Word of the Lord in Scripture has to be discerned; and we do the discernment most securely when we do it together. So a key hallmark of the faithful learner is the capacity to ask, in sympathy, how is this text heard from his point of view, or hers? How does this text sound in ears of the person who is different to me?

Fourthly, and for these prior reasons (because 'faithful learners' seek to be open to new insights, because they seek to acquire new skills, and because they seek to be attentive to others), faithful learners are acutely aware of the dangers of self-righteousness and seek to avoid it at

all costs. Faithful learners know they never cease to be anything more than faithful learners. They know they haven't got all the answers, and they read Scripture with the constant desire to be the recipients of more truth and light, as much from others as from God.

This essential humility is, I suspect, what led Reinhardt Niebuhr, the 20<sup>th</sup> century American theologian, to reply as he purportedly did when he was challenged by a zealous, but presumably threatened, Bible student. Waving a copy of the Scriptures in the air, the student demanded, 'Is this book, or is it not, the Word of God?'. Niebuhr is alleged to have replied, 'When you hold it, I'm not so sure. When it holds you, it is!'

## **Conclusion**

I must conclude. I want, in closing, first to offer you a worked example of Bible reading as 'faithful learners'; and second to offer a final observation.

So here's the worked example – I offer it not because it's a startling example particularly; it isn't. I offer it because it's one I myself have only learned recently. Last month, in October, in my own daily personal bible reading, I read my way through the Epistle to the Hebrews, with the aid of a commentary by George Guthrie. He helped me to appreciate things I'd never previously seen, and I thought I'd share an example with you.

This is the text of Hebrews 12.18-24, and Guy is going to read it for us. As it happens, it's quite an appropriate text for this time of the year, standing as we do between All Saints' Day and Advent Sunday – what *Common Worship* calls 'the kingdom season'. Guy.

At first sight, that's a bit impenetrable, isn't it? But – and this was **step one** for me in appropriating this text as a means of grace: the 'You have not come' in verse 18 is clearly echoed by the 'But you have come' in verse 22. So the passage falls into two parts, like this.

Once we see that, we're in a position to compare and contrast the two halves. So let's look a bit more closely at part one, where the writer assures the Hebrews that they have not come to a terrifying experience of God, of the kind that the Israelites had at Sinai. And it transpires that the writer has listed seven things that we have not come to.

With this, the writer wishes to contrast the experience of his or her own generation in the light of the coming of Christ. And again, the author frames the argument around seven illustrations: there's a triple reference first to Mt Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God – that's one thing, it seems to me; and then there's six more, making seven. Seeing those sevens was **step two**, for me, in appropriating this text as a means of grace. But I didn't feel I'd arrived yet. So, what about step three?

Well, clearly there are parallels to be drawn between the first half of the passage and the second – not least in seeing those sevens; but what about the contrasts? Well, one difference between the seven features of Mount Sinai and those of Mount Zion is that the things we **have** come to, as opposed to the things we have **not** come to, are relational. We have **not** come to something that can be touched, to a blazing fire, to darkness and gloom, the sound of a trumpet, or to an impersonal voice which only made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. But we

**have** come – notice this – to the city of the Living God, to angels, to the assembly of the firstborn, to the spirits of the righteous, to God the judge of all, to Jesus and to his sprinkled blood. Look how much more personal those characteristics are, how much more relational.

But there's more: the seven features of Mount Sinai only provoke terror. Look at verse 21, *'So terrifying was the sight that Moses said, 'I tremble with fear'*. By contrast, the seven features of Mount Zion are celebratory. Did you notice the reference to a festal gathering of the angels? A festal gathering – a party. A community, yes; but more than that, a community in celebration.

Now, please be clear: the writer is not contrasting Judaism with Christianity (and I think I can fairly assume that, at least at this point in the lecture, Stuart Blanch himself is cheering wildly from his celestial vantage point). No, the writer is not contrasting Judaism with Christianity – the author of the letter to the Hebrews was undoubtedly a Jew, writing to Jews, about their Jewish Messiah. Rather, this passage contrasts the degeneration of Judaism into something merely formal and ritual, which results in an impersonal, and therefore terrifying, vision of God; with its true self, as experienced by Abraham, by Moses and David, but which was only finally and fully manifest only in Christ. This true Judaism, into which, as St Paul would say, we Gentiles have now been grafted, knows itself to be in relationship to a God of mercy and love, by grace – and is therefore liberated to celebrate, in response, in gratitude. 7

Of course, it barely needs to be said that the Church is perfectly capable of backsliding as it were, from Mt Zion to Mt Sinai, degenerating into something merely formal and institutional, which can only terrify.

This precious passage of the Bible functioned as a means of grace to me when I grasped that it invites me to recognise what I have come to in the Gospel: not to a terrifying impersonal religious institution; still less a terrifying, impersonal deity, but to a God of relationship and a God of rejoicing. That was the Word of the Lord to me.

That brings me to my final observation. One of the great blessings of Anglicanism is the way it seeks to give equal weight in our liturgies of Holy Communion to word and sacrament. That's why, to take just a very small illustration, we are usually invited stand not only for the Eucharistic prayer, but also for the reading of the Gospel. In the light of this careful balance of word and sacrament, both equally as means of grace, I've once or twice begun a sermon with this invitation, the basis of which you may recognise: *'Draw near with faith. Receive the Word of the Lord which is addressed to you, the promise of life which is spoken to you. Hear it in remembrance that Christ died for you and feed on him in your hearts by faith with thanksgiving'*.

That, it seems to me, is the disposition of the faithful learner. Just as most of us are used to experiencing the bread and the wine in Holy Communion as a means of grace, as a source of life; just as we expect to find a certain intimacy with the Lord in the act of receiving the elements of the sacrament; just as we therefore come forward to receive the elements in reverent expectation, open-handed, so we need acutely in

my view to recover a sense of the Bible also as a means of grace and to bring to the hearing of the sermon and to our personal bible reading the same reverence, expectation and openness. To borrow one last phrase from Stuart Blanch: *'this is the only safe way to read the Bible (although, in another sense, it is a dangerous way)'*. Thank you.