

Itching Ears

Jeremiah 31:27-34; II Timothy 3:14 – 4:5

A few years ago in a television interview the brilliant Shakespearian actor Sir Ian McKellen said, “I have often thought the Bible should have a disclaimer in the front saying this is fiction.” The Bible is out of season for many people. People do not know it, and many will think it does not matter. It’s still one of the two books, along with the collected works of Shakespeare, that you get if you’re a castaway on Desert Island discs. Some people now ask not to have it.

Those of us reading through Luke’s Gospel in October are finding it more than challenging reading. There is much that seems familiar because we’ve heard or read it before. Few, I think, have read the Bible in this systematic way before. There are bits we are finding comforting, thought-provoking, unsettling, inconsistent, and heart-searching. And that’s only after twelve chapters!

We have found the character of Jesus at times elusive, insightful, sensitive, insensitive, compassionate, unattractive, and deeply human. I have been left wondering what I, as a Christian, let alone a Minister, really do think about Jesus. What are we, in the C21st, supposed to do with an itinerant first century Jewish carpenter who became a rabbi; whose life experience, world-view and assumptions are often different from my own? Jesus’ teachings sometimes sit comfortably, and sometimes very uncomfortably, in our world. Our world can sometimes be similar, but sometimes very different, to the world in which Jesus lived. What do we do with a Jesus Whose context and standards are different to ours, and yet find that a great deal of what He says still speaks volumes to how we live, or should live, our lives?

“Like a warning message in small print on the back of a cleaning solution bottle, these verses (from Paul’s Letter to Timothy) are last-minute instructions for Christians. In case of emergency, follow these directions: proclaim the message, convince, rebuke, and encourage.”ⁱ But what if we sometimes don’t like the message we hear, or don’t understand it? What if we want clarification, or want to argue, or disagree, with what we are hearing from the Bible?.

A colleague of mine some years ago did his doctoral research on preaching. He wanted to contrast and compare what he knew and thought he was preaching, with what the congregation heard and understood him to be saying. Surprisingly the two were not the same. I have often wondered if it is worth the bother preaching having read his findings!

Equally challenging, in Paul's pastoral advice to the young minister Timothy, is the injunction to watch out for congregations who have 'itching ears'. There wasn't some outbreak of a rash affecting people's ears in Timothy's church, but there was a tendency for people not to want to listen to the hard stuff of faith, which questioned, demanded and challenged. There was a tendency to want preachers who would tell the congregation what they wanted to hear. In those early years after Jesus' life, when the Christian church was still very young, there were already problems.

What are we to do with the tough messages of faith, which we don't like, or can't accept?

These recent reading days in Luke have made me wonder more about this. Are we to ignore what we don't like, and take our itching ears away to people and places that suit only what we think is right; to ensconce ourselves in the echo chamber where we hear only views we agree with, and meet only people we like, and share values and a way of doing things that are consistent with what we 'know' is right, because it's what **we** do?

If we can't cope with some parts of the Bible, and our faith, does that mean that we have to throw it all out, and can't really be considered as Christians? I know that for many people, this is a real issue.

Many of us, whether we read the Bible frequently, or rarely if at all, have our faith stuck somewhere in our Sunday school days. Our faith is largely unexamined. Perhaps we're frightened about what we do believe, and what we don't believe. Perhaps we struggle with a sense of inadequacy, or fear being found out. Perhaps we think it should all be left to the experts. Perhaps we think it doesn't really matter, and the thought of taking what has been essentially personal belief, and making it public, terrifies us. Perhaps we think that if we don't take everything as literally true, we are letting down God, the Church, and 2,000 years of

Christian tradition. Perhaps we believe it's better to say nothing at all, or simply drift away because it is all too hard to resolve.

Paul hopes for Timothy that he continues learning, as he begins his preaching. Timothy had been brought up to think, and to develop. There were sacred writings that made him think. There will be people from whom he would learn, and whose experience and understanding of the world will broaden his faith. There would be the need to witness to his faith when it's easy and when it's hard. Paul says to be 'urgent in and out of season'. He says to persist, and to be patient, and to be steady, whether it is easy, or hard.

When I look at my own faith, and wonder about its strengths and weaknesses, and look at the faith of other people in the same way, I am more often than not encouraged. Yes there are gaps, yes there are doubts, yes there are inconsistencies, yes there are failures. But I have found that, painful though it sometimes is, listening to the straightforward and easy, and the difficult and hard messages from the Bible, I am brought back to thinking about what really matters, and what I really believe. Sometimes it's not the parts of the Bible that I **don't** understand that give me the greatest problems, it's that parts that I **do** understand, or think that I understand that challenge me most.

Rather than giving up and walking away, rather than going after people and solutions that are easy and confirm my prejudices, I try to persevere, and go sometimes to those tougher places because it keeps my faith honest and real. It's messy, but it's authentic. We are called to use our imagination when it comes to reading the Bible, and see how far that might take our understanding, and that requires work.

Paul writes that the Bible is 'inspired by God', which literally means 'God-breathed'. In the poetry of creation stories God breathes life into human beings. So it is that God breathes life into the words of the Bible. We must not smother them. We have to let them breathe on their own terms as we try to work out what they might be saying to us today. Sometimes, they might not be saying anything to us; but other times the accuracy of these words of reading the human soul and condition will pierce us to the heart. It takes work.

A Princeton scholar after the horrors of World War One found that none of his rationalistic upbringing could help him make sense of what he had lived through in that terrible conflict. Nothing made sense, until he opened a Bible and came to the Beatitudes, the blessings that Jesus had taught, and discovered that as he read the Bible, the words of the Bible began to read him. When we read we should ask, why do I respond to these words in this way and not that? Why do these words comfort me, or upset me. Why do I feel as if I am being provoked, or soothed? The words read me, as much as I read them.

When I come to hearing the Bible, I don't want to have itching ears and go only to the bits I like, the bits I find easy, the bits I have long taken for granted so that, almost, they have lost their meaning. I need the in-between bits too. And even if I never fully understand them, or even accept them, maybe, just maybe, they will sharpen my awareness of those other parts that I had taken for granted and make me look at them again with new eyes, and fresh insight. Not simply to hear them, not simply to read them, but also to do something about them because their inspiration has fired me up and reminded me why I became a Christian in the first place.

One final thought, if this is true for how we handle the Bible, is it also true when we come to think about politics. Brexiteers need to take into consideration Remainers, and talk to them, and vice versa. Nationalists need to keep in touch with Unionists. People in the Extinction Rebellion need to keep in touch with the Energy Companies. Capitalists need to keep in touch with those devastated by poverty. Believers need to acknowledge doubters.

In a world that divides, discriminates and differentiates, in a world that has become more tribal, less nuanced, what we as Christians should strive to do is not to give in to our itching ears, and listen only to what pleases and confirms. But rather take the risk - with our Bibles, with our politics, with our world view - and work at the hard bits, and be surprised, sometimes, when with work, things **do** fall into place, and our minds, our lives, and our experience, are enhanced.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Olive Elaine Hinnant, Feasting on the Word Year C Vol 4, p182)