

## **‘The God who Calls’ – Exploring the God of Scripture**

*Genesis 2.15-17, 3.107*

*Psalms 32*

*Romans 5.12-19*

*Matthew 4.1-11*

How well do you know your Bible? You don't have to go too far back in our national history to arrive at a time when Biblical literacy was almost universal and highly prized; indeed, some of you may have received prizes at school for excellent marks in 'Scripture knowledge'. Understanding the Bible was simply expected within the much stronger Christian ethos of even the mid-twentieth century, if for no other reason than to enable an appreciation of all the rest of our culture: the Shakespeare and Milton, Spenser and Bunyan, Handel operas, our laws and constitution – I could go on. Further back in our history, the Reformation charged English Christianity with a passion for reading the Bible, including the hybrid Protestantism given form in the established Church of England. For all that the Prayer Book infuriated Puritans for the retention of papistical custom and ceremony, Thomas Cranmer's book instructed Anglicans to pray the whole psalter at morning and evening prayer over the course of a month; and to read at least the whole of Scripture in the course of a year. Our situation now is much changed: a broad appreciation for the Bible within our culture has been displaced by a suspicion of Scripture, and particularly Biblical fundamentalism. Within the church, reading the Bible well has taken on a new urgency, as the space between Christianity and culture has continued to widen.

As Christians we continue this task because we believe that Scripture opens to us truths about God, and his purpose for our lives. To return again to our Prayer Book, the sixth of the articles of religion articulates it this way: 'HOLY Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be

thought requisite or necessary to salvation.’ That is to say, God’s salvific purpose for us can be read, fully and reliably, in Scripture.

Anything else we might ponder about God or the universe, but which isn’t congruent with Scripture, must remain a matter of personal conjecture, and is binding on no-one. The Prayer Book also tells us which books belong to the Biblical canon, and as such have authority in matters of faith; and which extracanonical books have a secondary and more limited authority, for the formation of good morals. As to how we should read salvation out of scripture, the articles offer little in the way of practical guidance.

We can begin then, most practically, with some simple observations – many of which will be familiar. Scripture is not one monolithic text, but a collection of multiple texts, each of which has a complex history of composition and transmission. As texts, they reflect the cultural and historical experience of the Hebrew people, their neighbours and their rulers in very different times and places. They originate from as early as the late bronze age, to perhaps the turn of the second century; and their final organisation as Christian scriptures was not agreed by the Church until the fourth century. Our Bible is a complex literary composite which reflects the gestation of a people through time. To read any one part of it is to encounter layers of voices: voices in harmony, in conversation and sometimes in conflict. A deconstructive reading of Scripture can make hay while the sun shines; there is plenty of material in the Bible that can be read against other texts, to create a cacophony of fragments, configured around our own contemporary preoccupations. But the traditional Jewish and Christian approach is quite different, in seeking to trace a unifying line through textual multiplicity, always relating the discordant or oblique constructively back to the centre in order to construe its sense.

For the Jewish people, that unifying line is God’s consistent activity in creating the world, and constituting a people as his own. To draw a swift trajectory through the Hebrew Bible: the God who makes the cosmos is the same God who calls Abraham out of the wilderness and into a relationship of covenant; the same God who blesses Abraham’s

children and makes them increase; the same God remains faithful to that covenant when his people are enslaved in Egypt, and brings them back to the promised land. That very same God stands by his promises even when they fail in theirs: when they are exiled from their land, even then he brings them back.

The same God of Israel inspires his prophets to speak of a coming Saviour, who will fulfil his people's purpose and establish them in righteousness, for ever. There is the line, stretching from Genesis through to Malachi, from creation through to expectation.

And what of the Christian approach? In the experience of the Jews who first encountered Jesus of Nazareth, God's call was heard again, but in startlingly new form. The fishermen and tax-collectors hear a voice calling them to follow him; and for the very first time, they perceive the divine invitation issuing from a body, standing before them. In following him they come to realise that a second covenant has been formed between God and his people, but this time in the person of their teacher: a person whose blood is poured out on a cross; who comes back to them, most mysteriously, after being dead; and who returns to them again, when the fire of the Spirit falls on them at Pentecost. From their experience of Christ, dying and risen, the Christian reading of Scripture is born.

Crucially, Christians read backwards into the Hebrew Bible, discerning in every part of the experience of Israel a promise, however veiled, of one person: Jesus of Nazareth. But most important of all is the Christian reading of all Scripture – including the New Testament – as fundamentally subordinate to the complete revelation of God in the humanity of Jesus Christ. The Bible witnesses authoritatively to him, yes; but he is the one who reveals God, and his purpose for us, in his own flesh. And this is no static reality; because Christ continues to reveal God to us by sending the Holy Spirit on his church; and by transforming each of his members by infusing them with his risen humanity. If you are baptised, that's what you have running through you; when you eat the Eucharist, that's what feeds you.

So, to the worked example. Interpreting today's readings might show us how exploring the God of Scripture will lead us to the call who calls. Our first reading is the story of Adam and Eve's fall in the garden of Eden. They are created and placed there by God to experience the sheer delight of existence, and with it the constant experience of goodness. God gives them a command to eat what they like – with the exception of the fruit which will open their eyes to the possibility of doing evil, rather than what is good. It is a picture of conscience, poised before choice. The tempter appears; and his persuasion takes the form of a misinterpretation.

He misinterprets the intention of God's command as an expression of divine vanity, of fear lest he lose his singular moral judgment, and moral power. Adam and Eve choose to believe Satan's misreading: they eat, and the road to the abyss lies open before them. As Christians we look back to Eden recognising the familiarity of Adam's sin: it is real, ubiquitous, original. But we also look forwards from Eden, towards a second Adam; to one who will choose differently, and with decisive effect for those who come after him.

In our psalm which follows, the voice of Adam is heard again, blended with that of the psalmist. I will acknowledge my sin unto thee, and mine unrighteousness have I not hid, he sings; I said I will confess my sins to the Lord, and so thou forgavest the wickedness of my sin. But alongside Adam, the promise of Christ appears again too: Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth no sin; and in whose spirit is no guile.

We encounter that guileless spirit in today's gospel, not enjoying a garden of delight, but enduring a desert of exile. Here, the first new man faces the ancient choice, split three ways: to satiate his belly, and deny God's provision for body and soul; to play risk with the power of God, and to steal from God the honour which is his due. At each turn, Christ cites Scripture back at Satan, reading rightly the word of God against his false interpretations. Christ chooses with true wisdom, in accordance with God's command; and the tempter departs. What we see here, in the temptation in the wilderness, is an overture to Christ's great crisis of choice – whether he will choose to walk away, or go to the tree and hang.

And what of us, little Christs, in our Christian crises of choice; what of us as we choose our way, sinful and holy by turns, through the wilderness of Lent? Hear what St Paul writes to the disciples at Rome, disciples just like us. The free gift of Christ's nature is not like the trespass of Adam's; surely you have received the abundance of grace and that free gift through the one man, Jesus Christ. That gift is your justification, he exhorts them; it sets you right before God, and gives you every virtue you need to choose life, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Remember – he says to them and to us - that Christ's humanity is yours, iridescent and lovely, be it beneath your ashen skin. The God who is remaking you, from the inside – this is the God who calls you to walk by faith; rejoice in hope, and choose by love – both now, in this holy season, and into his eternity.