

18 July 2020

Why Bother with Scripture? (Acts 5.1-11)

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Last week, in the first of our reflections in this series ‘You Can’t Ask That’, we focused on the question – is the bible holy? Given the presence within the biblical text of passages that seem distinctly unholy, in what sense do we conceive of the authority or the sanctity of Scripture. This week’s questions also raise issues to do with the interpretation and reception of the bible. They reference two passages – one from the New Testament, and one from the Old. I’m going to ask Karen and Anne to share them now:

Karen

What meaning do you take from the story of Ananias and Sapphira? It seems unfortunate to me that Jesus’ ministry was focused on revealing the character of God and dispelling some Old Testament ideas, only to have this story suggest one wrong move and a vengeful god will strike you dead without so much as a chance to repent.

Anne

How do you explain the God in the Old Testament reading who tells Abraham to stab and burn and kill his son Isaac? I find it increasingly difficult to read the Old Testament. Why do we bother?

Each of these questions raises multiple issues – and of course, we could find hundreds more stories or passages that cause us some kind of discomfort, outrage or grief. What meaning **do** we take from the curious case of Ananias and Sapphira? How **do** we explain the God who tests Abraham’s obedience and faith, by requiring him brutally to sacrifice (or at least show himself willing to sacrifice) his beloved son Isaac? Are such tales merely hangovers of an archaic and often repellent vision of God? And if so, why on earth are we still reading them in the context of our worship and common life?

As you know, it is part of my role in our community to try to wrestle meaning and edification from even such texts as these! Reflecting at Benedictus a couple of

years ago on the story of Ananias and Sapphira, for example, I wondered if we might read it as a comment on the death-dealing consequences of untruth. This couple are members of the early church which has just been called into being by the Spirit at Pentecost – the Spirit that is life and truth. Ananias and Sapphira have tasted something of this reality. But now it's as if they're betraying it, falsifying their relationship to it. There seems to have been no compulsion that they sell and give away their property – they're choosing to offer it. But they are pretending to give more than they actually are. Notice that the text doesn't in fact say a vengeful God struck them dead. It's just that when they did what they did and then persisted in their lie when asked about it, the Spirit – the breath of life – simply left them: one after the other, they fell down and died.

And in a reflection on the Abraham and Isaac story, I've wondered if it could be read as offering a more complex vision of God than we might assume. For example, part of why we think the sacrifice asked of Abraham is so appalling is because the text itself makes us think that. In the narrative, God goes out of God's way to emphasise the magnitude and horror of what he's asking: 'Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac'. No opportunity is ever lost in the story to emphasise the relationship between Abraham as father and Isaac as his son. If we find ourselves contending with God in this text, could it be because this is what the text invites us to do? And in the end, the story seems to raise a radical question about exactly what Abraham is being asked to sacrifice after all. When God stays his hand, it seems significant that it's a 'ram' caught in a thicket that replaces Isaac as sacrifice, not a lamb as would be expected. A ram is a full-grown animal – a 'father' animal. Could it be that it's something in Abraham, and not Isaac at all, that is being surrendered?

Well, these are interpretive possibilities. But are they 'right'? Do they get the God of the bible off the hook? It's probably important for us to realise that the question of how to read the biblical text is part of the inheritance of both Jewish and Christian traditions. First century Jewish rabbis practised a way of reading the Torah

they called 'Midrash', which assumed that 'the meaning of a text was not self-evident. The exegete or interpreter had to go in search of it, because every time a Jew confronted the Word of God in scripture, it signified something different. Scripture was inexhaustible'.¹ Describing this practice of Midrash, scholar Karen Armstrong writes that the rabbis believed that only by constant reinterpretation to meet the needs of the day were the 'written words of scripture ... revitalised', and 'only then could they reveal the divine presence latent within God's Torah'.²

Similarly, early Christian teachers understood that reading Scripture was a complex art. Second century North African theologian, Origen was well aware that texts could be twisted or subject to facile interpretation. Moreover, he believed 'It was hard to find inspiration and sound teaching in some of the more problematic or unedifying biblical stories'.³ Part of Origen's interpretive strategy was, as for the rabbis, to read allegorically, looking for the 'spiritual meaning' hidden beneath an unpromising surface.⁴ And it's worth noting that this search for the hidden or spiritual meaning of Scripture is internal to the New Testament itself. The gospel writers approached the Hebrew Bible in just this fashion, drawing on its symbols and stories to see Christ prefigured in a range of earlier references and events. In fact, writes Armstrong, so thoroughly saturated are the gospels with these allusions that 'it can be difficult to disentangle fact from exegesis'. For example, 'Did his executioners really give Jesus vinegar to drink and cast lots for his garments or was this incident suggested by certain verses from the Psalms?'⁵ In the New Testament, what is presented as narrative is often primarily in service of a spiritual meaning, as perhaps in the Ananias and Sapphira story. This is the deeper 'truth' to be distilled from the text.

¹ Karen Armstrong, *The Bible: The Biography* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007), p.81.

² Armstrong, *The Bible*, p.82

³ Armstrong, *The Bible*, p.109.

⁴ Armstrong, *The Bible*, p.113.

⁵ Armstrong, *The Bible*, p.68.

At the same time, it's a feature of orthodox biblical interpretation that a sense of 'literal meaning' is never abandoned. As I said last week, the Scriptures testify to a God involved in the material world, and to a process of human beings learning to recognise how God is present in events and in their lived experience. Given this, the text can never be seen as merely allegorical, a large mythological symbol system. There's a necessary anchoring in history and somehow these two ways of reading, the literal and symbolic, the historical and spiritual meaning, must be held together. Just as in our own lives, we cannot ultimately pull apart our bodily, historical experience from the meaning we make of it, the meaning it makes of us.

But this brings us back to the questions with which we began. Because if we have to work so hard to make anything of these ancient texts, if we're having to interpret and reinterpret and explain and head off what we consider misreadings and misapplications, then (in Anne's pithy statement of the issue) 'why bother?' Is this the only or the best way **we** can meet or speak of God? Perhaps the compendium of Scripture has served its purpose – it's got us to a certain vision of God and the human good. Can't we just take it from here? Why are we still going back through these difficult and dangerous texts? Honouring them? Wrestling with them? There are times as I'm preparing a reflection on some obscure passage that I think – really?! In the face of the urgencies of our world, is this the best use of my (and your) intellect and time? Wouldn't we be of more use if we all just joined Amnesty International and read some good poetry instead? Well, I think this is a serious question – one that we each need to grapple with. As I sit with it, two things keep me going.

First, I think it matters that our imaginative sense of life is informed by something more than the orthodoxies of our particular time and place, which have their own blindspots and limits. As early as the second century, the preacher Marcion wanted to sever the link between Christianity and the Hebrew scriptures. He thought the God of the Old Testament had nothing to do with Christ, and advocated that Christianity make a decisive break with its own past. But the church held that you could only understand the deep meaning of Jesus if you saw him in relation to the

long story of God's involvement with Israel and in relation to the texts and traditions from which Jesus drew his own self-understanding. Relatedly, it seems to me, that (for better and worse) our spiritual journeys are profoundly shaped, enabled and potentially renewed by the imagination of this biblical tradition.

I cannot imagine being able to attend to or articulate huge amounts of my experience without reference to notions such as grace, liberation, vocation and obedience. But how would I get my language and my sense of the subtlety and depth of these notions, apart from some of our tradition's stories? Stories of hospitality and its refusal, of captivity and exodus, of call and response and promise? There are times in my life when a way forward has been given in the words of Scripture – words that have the meaning they do because of the depth from which they spring: 'Follow me'; 'Let it be unto me according to your word'; 'For nothing is impossible with God'. I don't suggest that God has no other way of communicating with people, with us, other than through these words or this tradition – but this is a way. It's a way that connects us to one of the deepest expressions of the human journey over time, in stories wrought, re-wrought and preserved over centuries. That counts for something, I think.

The second thing that keeps me going is related. When you read about the process of the bible's composition and compilation, it's a bit vertigo inducing – it seems at one level ridiculously contingent, political and accidental. There's absolutely no sense of comprehensive divine control. And yet, something, Someone can be encountered in its pages. There are stories of people who've had quite dramatic experiences of this. For me, it's never been like that, yet sometimes (and often it is in the texts that seem most deeply strange) I have a sense of something beyond ... the mystery of the invisible God somehow pressing through and under the words. But this only happens if I remember to approach the text in a certain spirit. Humbly, with stillness, curiosity and attention – rather than impatiently, judgementally as if what matters most in my reading is whether I approve or not,

whether I agree or not. To understand involves standing ‘under’ rather than standing ‘over’ what I seek to know – at least in the first instance.

This doesn’t mean giving up our critical faculties, swallowing it all at face value, or acting out some simplistic understanding of ‘what the bible says’ – as if it ever ‘says’ just one thing. Our responsible and critical engagement matters, and is (as I said last week) invited by the text itself. But it does seem to me that, as a spiritual practice, reading Scripture is part of how we’re displaced from the centre of our own lives, part of softening our ego-ic reactivity. We are asked to be truly attentive to what is simply given, what we didn’t invent and may not particularly like. It may be that a text remains impenetrable or abhorrent to us – at least for now; or it may be that some surprising newness or insight is yielded. And even in those times when we don’t find Scripture itself worth the bother, I wonder if this way of approaching its difficulties may help us attend in a new way, and with a new curiosity to the unedifying and difficult parts of our own experience. Those parts of *our* lives which we did not invent and may not like. Perhaps we might even find ourselves encountering God somewhere in the midst!