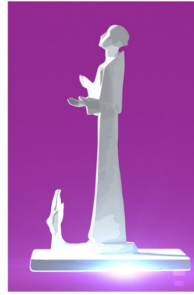


EXPLORING THE BIBLE

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Theme 2: How to approach the Bible

Question 2d. How should we read the Bible?

1. If we choose to read the Bible sacramentally as Greg suggests, what might that mean for our reading habits? Our attitudes in reading, or our expectations for what we might discover?
2. How might reading sacramentally influence our acceptance of what we DO discover?
3. If this is something you'd like to do, perhaps use a journal to plan your reading times and reflections from the process.
4. In our BIBLE360 Intro to the Bible seminar, we talk about the '3 Worlds of the Bible' approach: The world OF the text, the world BEHIND the text and the world IN FRONT of the text. Greg has expanded on that. If that intrigues you, do some research and see what you can find out.

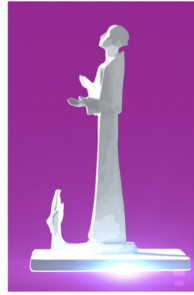
Greg Jenks

I like to think of the Scriptures as a kind of a sacrament, sacramental. By this I mean something of this world, a text, which humans have created through a process, using human technology and assets to create this sacred literature. But when we're using sacred literature, it's also being used by God to bless, to communicate as a moment of grace.

Now for example, someone can come up for communion and have very little formal theological sense of the significance of the eucharist. But the image-

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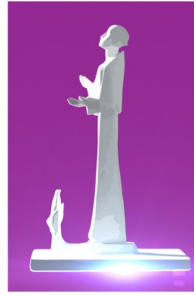
ry of coming to the table and receiving some of the food that's on the table and being able to drink from the cup invokes primal imagery. People are touched by it and God is at work. They don't have to have a properly developed eucharistic theology in order to be blessed by participating. Otherwise we'll all be in trouble except for one or two people in the world who think they've got it sorted out.

I have a similar approach to scripture. If we're approaching Scripture with an attitude of openness and trust and anticipating God is going to be loving and gracious and good for us, then the Scriptures are going to be an encounter of grace. Equally we don't have to have a good grasp of the history, a good grasp of the compositional process by which the books were written, the canonical process by which they become authoritative. Some of that 2000 years of translation and theological debate is useful to have, but it's like an art critic, who will get more out of going to an art gallery than someone who doesn't have that art training.

Similarly, we can all use Scripture. We can all misuse the scripture as well, but we can all use the Scriptures with an openness and a naive expectation that I'm going to read this book and I expect this God is going to have something to say to me. Of course, we can also come to the book saying, "Now I can see that Paul is really dealing with a problematic issue with the church in Corinth". In that way we have a more nuanced way of engaging with Scripture. Sometimes, despite our much-vaunted theological training, something hits us totally out of left field. That's the nature of Scripture and the nature of the God who speaks through Scripture. So, for me it's more about using scripture as a sacramental and spiritual process rather than an argumentative or a legalistic, interpretive process.

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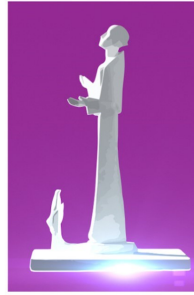
There is one way of thinking about approaching the Bible which I think is really useful and that's to think about the Bible as functioning in 3 different worlds. One of those is the world we live in. I'll come to that in a moment. The other is the world, (worlds plural really), through which the Bible has come on its journey to us, and then the third (really the starting line), is the world out of which the Bible originated and to which the Bible usually is referring. So the Bible is rarely referring to any other time than its own.

So while you don't have to be an expert in any of those including your own life here and now, if we want to make sense of the Bible, one of the ways of doing that is try to pay attention to: where did it come from, where was it written, what kind of people were involved in the production of this text, for whom was the text intended? If we have a sense of who it was intended for that might help us. What was going on in their world, what things mattered to them, what do they lie awake at night worrying about and so on. If we have a sense of what the world back then was like that gives us a perspective on the text as it comes to us. As I said we don't have to be experts in the ancient world but just to know that the ancient world was different from our world may be enough just to prise that little window open a little bit.

The second world is getting inside the story world of the text itself and appreciating in its own in its own right. If we take Mark's gospel, we can think about Mark and the Roman empire and Galilea in the first century, that's the world *before* the text but Mark, like any movie we go to see, or any book we get engrossed in, Mark has created his own kind of narrative world. In that world there are certain characters and so one of the ways of really understanding the text is to pay attention to how the dynamic is going inside that little world, the world of Mark. So paying attention to that and noticing Mark's almost breathless style. I was listening to a colleague talking just last week about Mark's

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gospel, and some of the latest research is suggesting that Mark was actually an unfinished set of notes for an essay that never got written and submitted. So that is taking us back to the world before the text but again if we understand the dynamics inside the Markan material, it gives us a way of understanding Mark and hearing Mark's take on things as distinct from Matthew's take on things.

Then there's the world in which the reader lives. So when I read the text, I'm reading as a Western male, who's quite privileged (although I always think there are other people better off than me and there are but you know), my life is really privileged. And I'm also a religious professional and most of my adult life has been spent in teaching and studying scripture. So I will read the text through that lens. If I was in a very different social location then I would naturally read the Bible through that lens. I'm looking for wisdom from the text that speaks to me in my time and place, so that's if you like, that's the world of the reader.

So you've got the world *behind* the Bible, the world out of which the Bible comes, you've got the world created *inside* the Bible whether its one book or even the canon in a sense creates a sort of meta story and then there's the world of the reader (*in front* of the text) and we bring our questions, but we also bring our situation to bear and the text speaks to us in our situation.