

The Role of the Bible in the Christian Life

2Peter 1:16-21

October 12th, 2003

As a young boy I remember lying in bed reading the first two chapters of Genesis fascinated by the creation story. It fired my imagination and opened my heart up to the majesty and wonder of God. This is my one and only memory of reading the bible until many years later as a teenager in Canada. Now as a mature student of the Bible I have discovered that it is an amazing collection of books, containing many different literary genres, written by many different authors over many centuries, and yet presents a marvelous unified message. I am quick to say that it's not perfect. As Barbara Brown Taylor points out in her collected sermons, **The Preaching Life**, any serious study will soon discover human fingerprints all over the place. Yet God has been pleased to speak to the human race through these imperfect humans who wrote out of their experience, out of their own limited time frame, and yet who were guided by God's Spirit.

If we listen to some of what the bible says about itself we get this message. Poets, singers, historians, moralists, visionaries, prophets, all speak with the same voice about the God who inspires them. The prophets never stop saying that this Word of God will never cease from speaking. It is a word that reaches down to us through the centuries with incredible power and relevance.

Listen to the prophet Isaiah: *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.* We hear Jesus saying in John's Gospel: *The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life...* In response to Jesus' question about whether or not they too will leave him, Peter says, *Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.* In the book of Hebrews we read this about the bible: *Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.* (Hebrews 4:12)

The bible has the amazing ability to reach into our hearts and minds and transform our lives. It can speak in fresh and arresting ways to me every time I pick it up. If I were to go back to other ancient books, such as classic texts on medicine or cosmology or physics, I would enter a world that is easily recognizable as outdated and severely limited and irrelevant to my modern mind. Not so the bible. While even more ancient than these other reference books, it continues to speak to me in language that opens me up and offers moral and spiritual guidance. However familiar I might become with certain passages, whenever I return to them I discover that they have grown in my absence, and reveal something entirely new to me that speaks directly to my current situation. God speaks to me through these ancient, human writings in ways that no other writing does. This bible is a living word for us! Surely this is Peter's point when he responds to Jesus that he alone has the words of eternal life. No other man had ever spoken like this man. No other speech had the power to make us feel so alive to God.

This is the point of our reading from second Peter. We are told that because these writings are so authoritative we ought to heed them. We need to be attentive to this biblical tradition as it is like a lamp shining in a dark place. None of these writing, Peter tells us, came about in the usual fashion. They were not the result of some cunningly devised fables born in some people's minds. No these writings have authority and power because God has chosen to speak through human writers. These writings are so inspired by God's Spirit, although the product of human hands, they are the means through which God chooses to speak. In these books God walks toward me and seeks to enter into relationship with me. This is the heart of the bible; it is the story of God's seeking to find a way back into our hearts.

Quite often we moderns are not open to listening. I am reading the first of the Morse novels by Colin Dexter entitled **The Last Bus to Woodstock**. In it one of the characters, Bernard Crowther, has found himself in a moral quagmire. He has been involved in a number of affairs and his wife has sensed his drift away from her. The tension over this deceit is palpable in the marriage. He secretly wishes he could have ended the affair long ago. But he couldn't or wouldn't and his conscience is smarting. Guilt and remorse lie heavy over his heart. He remembers vaguely from school days the chorus they lustily sang, "*Though your sins be as scarlet, scarlet, scarlet, they shall be whiter, yea whiter than snow.*" But now he can't pray-his spirit is parched

and desolate. Whatever religious sensitivity he had is now overlaid by a hard veneer of learning, culture and cynicism. The bible no longer has the ability to help him.

While our sins often keep us away, it is often merely neglect that keeps us distant from God's message. I chuckled when I read Kathleen Morris' section on the bible in her collection of essays in her book, **Amazing Grace**. She and her husband met an old-timer in the Dakota's whose grandparents had been dirt-poor immigrants who homesteaded in South Dakota. Their early years were hard as they sought to eek a living out of the soil. But they prospered and eventually had a large ranch. The grandfather got where he was by being very careful with his money, making as much as possible and spending as little as possible. The son of this man told Kathleen that he faced a crisis in his life with cancer. Out of the blue he told them about his religious grandfather who had given him and his bride a wedding present of a bible. It was bound in white leather with their names and dates of their wedding set in gold letters on the cover. He told them that he left in the box and ended up in the bedroom closet. Every time they saw grandpa he would ask him how they liked the bible he had given them. Well years later his curiosity got the better of him and so he got down the box and opened it. To his amazement he found a twenty dollar bill at the beginning of the book of Genesis and at the beginning of every book in the bible. His grandfather had known that he wouldn't ever open the bible and had played a huge joke on him. Over thirteen hundred dollars in total were hidden in the bible, a lot of money in those days.

A lot of families are like him. We have beautiful family bibles gathering dust somewhere in our house because we never open them to discover the treasures inside. Many today suffer a huge loss of memory because the story in the bible no longer connects in meaningful ways with our story.

What is it about the bible that makes it living and fresh if we take the time to consult it? As Barbara Taylor suggests, the bible informs me that my odd little life is not just the haphazard result of evolution, but rather the loving purpose of God the Creator. It reminds me again and again that I am not an orphan, that I am loved and have a community, a history, a future, a God who is always beckoning me back. The bible, in other words, is alive and fresh and always relevant because its stories, poems, histories, laments,

prophecies, gospels and letters, all seek to plug me into the living story that has been going on since the Garden of Eden. It seeks to connect my story, messy and limited and frustrated at times that it is, with the larger story of God's loving plan for the human race. The bible speaks to me about a God who enters into covenant with us, who leads us step by step toward a God who comes, lives and dies, for us. I am part of that big story. So are you.

And it's a story, not about a distant, remote being. This God of the bible comes close. He is immersed in our earthly existence. He comes to Moses and asks him to take off his shoes because where he stands is holy ground. The bible is not a book about a disembodied deity who speaks to us in philosophical couplets. This God of the bible comes down to us, enters our world of dust, deceit, and death. We don't have to become angelic, or leave our bodies and human passions behind when we enter this world of the bible. God comes to us through a burning bush, a great wind, a pillar of cloud, as still small voice, a dove, a newborn baby. The sacred and secular are not separated in the bible. It is commonplace to think that entering the holy place demands some sort of physical strip tease act. We imagine that to be in God's presence we have to become something less than we are. Any reading of the bible should dispel any such notion. God is everywhere encountered in the midst of the physical reality of life.

The bible is not populated by perfect, spiritual folk. They are amazingly just like you and I, imperfect sinners who often do the most absurd things. Noah gets drunk, Abraham lies, Sarah mocks, Jacob cheats and deceives, David kills and commits adultery, disciples run when things get threatening, and apostles argue over how the church should develop. Nor is God conventional. This God is a consuming fire, a bringer of judgment, and a voice that will not be silenced. God is the Sovereign One who is holy. But God's love is a holy fire also and God will not give up on a rebellious creation. God will die for them. In Jesus we hear and see how we ought to live. In him the future is mapped out for all to see. This is the story spelled out in living colour through the dramatic history of the Jewish people and reaches a climax in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord. To be connected to this story is to be alive to my past, my present and my future. To ignore this book is to miss the very point of my existence. This is why the bible has a central role in our lives. Through it God still speaks.

Amen