

How do we feed on scripture?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 15 August, 2021

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 12B

**Psalm 111; Contemporary reading: 'On the word God'
from Martin Buber in *Eclipse of God*; John 6: 51-58**

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

What is there to eat in the Christian scriptures? It can often be challenging for many people to find answers to that. We live, after all, in very different times from those in which the books of the Bible were composed. It is not, of course, a new question. Decades ago, at theological college, I recall a leading biblical scholar, a Canon of Christ Church Oxford, throwing a similar testing query to myself and my fellow students. If we were to omit books from the Bible on grounds of significant racism, anti-semitism, sexism, and other forms of violence, how many would we be left?

Which books of the Bible would you keep? Canon Fenton's immediate answer was "*just three: the Mark's Gospel, the Letter of James, and the book of Revelation*". However, in subsequent discussion, he agreed that each of those scriptures also had problematic features. As we hear again today part of the Gospel of John chapter 6, what then are we say about, and still more feed upon, in the books we call 'holy' scriptures?

Is there real nourishment in scripture? I want to affirm a strongly positive answer to that question. There is no doubt however that scripture remains a challenge too, with different elements arising for different people. It is also a particular challenge with which so-called 'progressive' church communities must wrestle. For, try as we may, we will never be able to reach a wholly 'pure', or 'fully inclusive', approach to scripture, any more than we will find it in any other aspect of our worship and life together.

As much as we might sometimes do our best to find appropriate translations, or to shape liturgies and reflections with care, the scriptures will always be awkward, and even, at times, disturbing for us. Moreover, if we try to restrict our use of scripture to that which will never offend, we will miss their very point and gift. For, like the divine mysteries of life to which, at times, it stumblingly points, the Bible continues to have spiritual power, precisely because of its awkwardness, and its problematic 'fit' with any set of human values, including the best of our own. Its very otherness is a vital part of its gift.

Of course there have been attempts to 'clean up' scripture throughout history. Going back to the early Church, the theologian and church leader Marcion was a notable proponent. Repelled by the angry and violent depictions of God in the Hebrew Scriptures, he was probably the first Christian to establish a canon of 'acceptable' scriptures. These amounted only to ten letters of Paul and a shortened version of the Gospel of Luke.

In more modern times, there was also a dedicated attempt by many scholars, particularly in liberal Protestant circles, to find the 'historical' Jesus and to strip away what was felt to be additions to the Gospel, in order to reveal its supposed essential 'kernel'. Perhaps the Jesus Seminar was in one sense the final culmination of this interpretative trajectory, with its famous, or infamous, use of coloured beads to determine what was more or less 'authentic' to Jesus. Does this actually however directly provide food to eat? Notwithstanding the considerable fruits of much of this work, the question remains: how do we feed on scripture today? For there is a great difference between simply identifying ingredients, tracing their provenance, and perhaps sieving them for quality, and actually cooking and eating.

As I remarked a couple of weeks ago, John chapter 6 as a whole is a powerful and lengthy exposition of the central theme of God in Christ as the Bread of Life. Today's Gospel reading is but a bite-sized chunk of it, and there will be yet another small portion next week. It is quite likely that its origin lies in a synagogue homily, but that it has been considerably re-worked and developed. Does this matter? As I've said, particularly in the liberal Protestant tradition, the answer has been a fulsome 'yes'. There was a quite understandable, desire to identify the ingredients and assess them on the basis of acceptable tastes and how they have been cooked and served up in the past. Arguably however, this actually runs somewhat counter to the energies behind John chapter 6 itself and the scriptures as a whole.

Frankly, John's Gospel, and I would suggest Jesus too, is simply not interested in modern truth concerns such as exactitude, reflexivity, and the authenticity of provenance. Neither the author of John's Gospel, nor I would suggest Jesus either, are liberal Protestants, or progressives, or open spiritual seekers, or whatever we can too easily associate with our kinds of contemporary spirituality. Instead, there is a stark directness of speech, affirming a gospel – a good news – of transcendent religious truth which speaks into every context, rather than merely dialoguing or reflecting upon it. 'Unless' (my emphasis), says John's Jesus, '*you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.*'

Let us be very clear. This is not fundamentalism either, nor even conservatism. Here John's Gospel is again much more deeply radical, in both means and content. We need also to remember that this is written from a context of persecution and threat to the early Christians. Whatever the specific origins of this great discourse, the writer has certainly profoundly re-shaped the Hebrew scriptures they have inherited and they have powerfully re-centred human experience of God.

Behind today's text is therefore an extraordinary wrestling with earlier scriptures and the experience of God to which they sought to witness. John's Jesus continues to refer to foundational elements in the people of Israel's life journey. Not least, Jesus speaks in John chapter 6 of bread, Moses, and manna in the wilderness. Every sentence thus resonates with the crucial stories of liberation, new life, and living relationship with the living God at the heart of biblical faith. Yet these have been dramatically transformed.

Vitally, there is also a deep wrenching here. For this is no mere considered reflection on life. This is existential truth: a witness to human angst and communal struggle; a proclamation of hard-won salvation through surprising grace. In which sense, we begin to see the continuing life-giving value of the Christian scriptures – as vital aids and pathways for us too – to make the same journey into religious depth; as we too are invited to wrestle with our own personal angst and communal struggles; as we too reconnect with the particular, and the larger, stories of which we are a part; as we too enter deeper into relationship with what ultimately feeds, sustains, and gives us life – the relationship with God.

Relationship with God: this is the ultimate key to the scriptures. The modern reading ('On the word God' from *Eclipse of God*) from the great Jewish sage Martin Buber which I chose for today, is part of this kind of affirmation we encounter in our Gospel text today. Buber was particularly insightful and insistent on this. If, he also said, we were to write the opening words of Genesis as '*In the beginning there is relation*' (my emphasis), we would understand more truly. Relation, relationship – this is at the heart of faith: not doctrine as such, not mere traditions, not unalloyed experience (if there is such a thing), nor scripture alone. Yet they are all bound up together.

Buber's affirmation of the word 'God' in his essay 'On the word of God' is a powerful expression of the intensity and depths of relationship to which people of faith are called. If we choose, we can remain on the surface. We can remain, as it were, socially distanced, from both others, and, vitally, ourselves, in the ultimate mystery human beings have called 'God'. We can avoid being compromised by association with others, and with the meanings which have sometimes been attached to aspects, even key features, of faith, even to God (or at least the name of 'God'). We can chase illusions of objectivity, and muscular, or intellectual, individuality. Or we can enter into deeper relationship. We can taste and eat of the bread of life.

Perhaps you may disagree, but what Buber wrote about the word 'God', can I think be applied to the Christian scriptures. We can distance ourselves from them because, like the word 'God', they have, in Buber's expression, become '*so soiled, so mutilated*': or we can honour the profound struggles with life and mystery of which they speak, and re-use them in our own struggles today. For the scriptures, like the word 'God', are indeed what Buber called 'the word of appeal' to the ultimate.

Buber's philosophy and pathway of faith was focused on nurturing what he termed the '*I-Thou*' relationship. This stands in direct contrast to the '*I-It*' encounter, which is where we stand outside of one another and essentially treat one another, and the rest of creation, as objects. The '*I-It*' way of living (or dying!) is perhaps particularly well fostered today in late capitalist Western societies. Yet, as today's Gospel text proclaims, only an '*I-Thou*' relationship can ultimately feed, sustain, and renew us.

Now I would never want to interpret any part of scripture through a single lens. I wonder, however, whether Buber's insights are one pathway to help illuminate John chapter 6 for us again? For what we see in John's 'Bread of Life' discourse is a similar intense emphasis on relationship, not mere encounter. John's Jesus here recalls us to the '*I-Thou*' relationship at the heart of biblical faith: to what Paul Tillich called '*the God beyond God*' (or the mere uses of the word 'God'). This is the living mystery, the ground and depths of being, with which the various biblical scriptures wrestle and bear witness in different ways.

Well, at this point, if some of you are not already wanting to ask questions, then I certainly am. Whose experience and relationships, past and present, and not least in the Bible, are we then talking about? Could we be in danger of retreating from more uncomfortable questions into more easy forms of personal mysticism? Do we risk avoiding the specifics of power, race, sex, gender, culture and economics which shape our lived existence and which are easily sacralised by our assumed readings of scripture? Those pertinent questions have led to more recent, and often quite exciting, perspectives on scripture. For Buber's existentialist approach to faith only opens up pathways. It also, if we are not aware, carries with it assumptions about both the character of our own experience and that of the scriptural texts.

19th and 20th century liberal biblical scholarship created some wonderful interpretative tools and perspectives. Yet with them came their own presuppositions, which were inevitably reflections of their own experience – as, typically, white, Western, affluent, academic, and straight, males. There are therefore vital things for us all to build upon. Our challenge today, however, is further to empower ‘other’ voices, fully listen to them, and to seek deeper, more life-giving, relationships together. Similarly, in the scriptures themselves, which features have we unconsciously privileged, and whose eyes and voices have we seen and heard? Beyond Buber, we also have to ask: Who is the I? Who is the Thou?

I wonder whether, at Pitt Street, with others in so-called ‘progressive’ theological circles, whether we are in a new stage which has yet to open up fully in Australia. The Common Dreams movement, for example, has helped share many fruits, including enduring insights of white Western progressive men as Borg, Crossan, Fox, Meyers, and Spong. Yet are we fully attuned to, and participating in, the emergent insights of those who speak from today’s more radical postcolonial, First Nations, queer, womanist, feminist, dis/ableist, younger generational and intersectional spaces? Viewed with such a kaleidoscope of eyes and experiences, the scriptures come alive in very different ways.

That can be further disconcerting for those who seek simplistic answers from the Bible and to scriptural interpretation. However, if we seek to feed upon the scriptures, they identify ingredients in fresh ways, offering new menus and means of presentation. As I said two weeks ago, if we do not go deeper into the theological questions we now face, all our other concerns will ultimately suffer. I hope that we will also reflect further about this particularity of experience next week, in relation to the last part of John chapter 6. However, for the moment, attending simply to our own personal experiences, I invite us to use our scriptures as ways into authentic ‘I-Thou’ relationship, not mere ‘I-It’ encounter.

To summarise, how do we, as individuals, and as a faith community, regard the scriptures? Do we see them as only problematic objects, set over against us, or as fellow subjects with whom, and in which, to dialogue?

Are we seeking an ‘I-Thou’ relationship with them, or ‘I-It’ encounters at an appropriate social distance?

As Martin Buber affirmed, the word ‘*God*’ is much ‘*defiled and mutilated*’. But to cast it off is to lose, not only our bearings, but also a vital pathway into depth and transcendence. Similarly, like the word ‘*God*’, we cannot simply ‘*cleanse*’ the Christian Bible and ‘*make it whole*’. Yet it is a part of us, which, like ourselves, can be redeemed. Indeed, as with our own personal stories, it is sometimes the most difficult parts which, in wrestling with the Spirit, can ultimately renew and refresh us. After all, there is a reason why time and attention make for tastier and more enriched food.

Let me therefore end, where we began today, in the musical preface to our worship, with Paul Robeson (*It ain't necessarily so*). I deliberately shared his gospel singing today because it highlights the enduring power of the Christian scriptures for many marginalised people. That is awkward, I know, not only for secular people, particularly those on the left. It is also sometimes a little discomfiting for more liberal Christians that it is not more sophisticated theology which appeals.

Such realities bring us back to the truth of John chapter 6 and Martin Buber's insights. For human beings ultimately seek a God who is relationship – a personal Thou – not an abstract It.

Either scripture feeds us in our needs, as we wrestle with God in and through it, or, like those addressed by Jesus in the Gospel reading today, we have missed its point.

Everything in the scriptures most certainly 'ain't necessarily so', and we need to attend wisely.

Yet they remain a vital source of liberation, wherever and whenever we hear the voice *'let my people go'*.