

MARK EAREY

This is the Word of the Lord: The Bible and Worship

Mark Earey argues that the public reading of Scripture in its own right has become impoverished in our churches, ironically often in evangelical churches which want to affirm the centrality of the Bible. He calls for renewed attention to Scripture as the spoken word for the gathered people of God, in preaching, in public reading and in spoken words and songs.

Where do you expect to encounter Scripture? Reading the Bible in a 'quiet time' or other personal devotional context? Wrestling over some point of interpretation at a house group (or cell group)? Helping enquirers to find answers to questions during a session of Alpha? Trying to work through some contentious pastoral, moral or ethical dilemma and to formulate policy for your church? All of these are possible and legitimate answers. But are they sufficient?

[The Bible] belongs essentially at the heart of Christian worship, for it is above all a proclamation to be heard. It is not a handbook of doctrine or ethics.¹

This is a bold statement to make, but it derives from a serious desire to engage with the nature of the Bible as it actually is, rather than as we tend to use it. There is no arguing with the fact that the Bible was written down in a culture in which *hearing* the word was the expected norm, and reading it was simply the means of its proclamation – it was always read aloud. Both New and Old Testaments contain many exhortations to 'hear the word of the Lord,' and none to 'see the word of the Lord'. The primary place for hearing the word was the assembly of God's people for prayer, praise and fellowship. It can be argued that not only was worship the chief context for encountering Scripture, it was the place where Scripture, as such, was formed: decisions about the canon of Scripture were essentially decisions about which writings were appropriate for public reading as formative and normative documents of the faith.

Yet in our culture(s), that sense of the Bible as the community's book, encountered primarily by hearing it proclaimed in public, has largely given way to other models. The coincidence of the sixteenth century European Reformation with the widespread use of the new technology of printing using moveable type

1 Neville Clark, 'Scripture in liturgical perspective' in Donald Gray, ed., *The Word in Season*, The Canterbury Press, Norwich 1988, p 23.

profoundly influenced protestant (and especially evangelical) Christians. Among them the Word of God is primarily expected to be encountered in a printed form, in the context of the Bible as a whole book – a book found and used as much in the home and the study as in a public service of worship. By contrast, the worshipper in the first centuries of the church's life encountered Scripture as a *spoken* word, proclaimed in the context of public worship, and controlled largely by that context. Fritz West has characterized these two ways of encountering God's word as, respectively, the protestant and catholic 'holders' of Scripture.² One result of conceiving of Scripture as primarily something that you encounter visually is that it privatizes the Bible. A printed Bible available in a vernacular language undoubtedly opened up (and still opens up) the Bible to 'the people', but it does so in an individualizing way: the Bible no longer belongs primarily to a corporate context in which it is spoken out loud and heard by a number of people simultaneously; it now belongs just as much to the inner world of my thoughts and interpretations, free of the constraints of other people. When I hear it read out in public I am likely to be following it in print. This is not to suggest that it would be sensible for us to move to a pretended illiteracy (in cases where this *would* be pretended: clearly there are many situations in which it would be real). It may, however, cause us to ask whether following the reading in a Bible is best done as it is being read aloud, or better saved until the sermon provides a context in which more detailed engagement with the text is appropriate and necessary.

One of the interesting questions raised by the 'cell church' models will be, 'Where does the Bible fit in?'. Standard 'cell church' thinking asserts that the cell *is* the primary locus of 'church' (in contrast to the more traditional model in which the congregation is the church, to which cells belong in a secondary way). A typical cell meeting makes space for both Bible and worship³ – but the two are separated (in the theory at least – the practice may vary). The Bible is there to be applied practically, but not proclaimed. Those who are developing cell church theory and practice may want to consider where in the cell model the Word of God is 'proclaimed'. If this only takes place at the congregational level, and the congregation is essentially secondary, is this being true to the nature of Scripture?

The context in which one meets the Bible, both initially and regularly, plays a huge part in forming one's assumptions about what the Bible is, how it works and what it is for. The assumptions of the person who meets the Bible primarily and regularly in discussion, in finding answers to questions, in learning and so on, will differ significantly from those of the person who encounters the Bible primarily as something proclaimed in public as good news. One of the legitimate questions to ask of the Alpha course (and similar enquirers' courses, where the Bible is used primarily to provide answers to a set of predetermined questions) is, 'What model for the use of Scripture does this form in those who, through the course, become Christians?'. One of the challenges facing such groups is how to ground new

2 Fritz West, *Scripture and Memory: the Ecumenical Hermeneutic of the Three-Year Lectionaries*, Pueblo, Collegeville 1997. I have written more about this and the implications for understanding the *Revised Common Lectionary* in 'A Help to Spirituality:

the Bible and the Three-Year Lectionary' in the Bible Society's journal *The Bible in Transmission*, Summer 1999, pp 11ff.

3 See, for instance Howard Astin, *Body and Cell*, Monarch, Crowborough 1998, p 22ff.

Christians in the narrative flow of the Bible (and of particular stories in it) as well as in questions of doctrine and discipleship.

How should the Bible be used in worship?

I take worship, in its fullest sense and in NT terms, to be life lived to the glory of God.⁴ Anything that happens in the congregation or the cell (on Sunday or some other day) is a subset of that and is 'worship' only in a derivative sense. Such 'worship' might helpfully be distinguished from the offering of the whole of our lives, by referring to it as 'liturgy' – the public, corporate, symbolic, worship of God by the people – whether it follows some set 'liturgical' form or not.

To say that liturgy is derivative and secondary is not, however, to say that it is unimportant. On the contrary: it sets and forms assumptions about God and his passionate concerns that make a huge difference to the way we live as Christians. Care needs to be taken that the way the Bible is used in liturgy models the way the Bible should be used in daily life. There are three main ways that the Bible is customarily used in the liturgy: preaching, public reading, and spoken words and songs.

Preaching

Preaching might be defined as 'speaking after the Scriptures, in the assembly.' In churches of an evangelical tradition, or with Evangelicals as regular preachers, there will be an assumption that the preaching will be biblical: that is, it will begin with the Scripture passage and work from there to address life today, or it will begin with some question, issue or event, and consider it from the perspective of the Bible. This raises an interesting issue about the relationship between the preacher and the Bible passage or passages. Does the lectionary (or some other means of choosing the Bible reading) set the agenda for the preaching, or does the preaching agenda choose the Bible readings?

The *Common Worship* lectionary takes a twofold approach to the choosing of Scripture passages which reflects this dilemma:⁵

- In the 'seasonal' parts of the year, the Scripture passages are chosen to fit the agenda set by the season. This is not unlike the way that an evangelical church might decide to have a sermon series on 'Giving' and choose Bible readings that would support it.
- In what the lectionary calls 'ordinary time', the readings are determined by patterns of 'semi-continuous' passages, which work through books of the Bible roughly (and sometimes it is rougher than others!) chapter by chapter week by week. In this case the biblical context of the passage sets the agenda for preaching (or ought to).

This twofold use of Scripture in public reflects the twofold use of Scripture in the lives of believers:

4 A key text is Romans 12:1. I have written at greater length about this in 'Worship: What do we Think we are Doing?' *Evangel*, 16:1 (Spring 1998), pp 7ff.

5 It shares this twofold approach with the three-year lectionaries on which it is based: the Roman Catholic *Lectionary for Mass* and its ecumenical derivative, the *Revised Common Lectionary* of 1992.

- There are times when the Bible is used to support or interpret our life situation, which has already set the agenda. An example of this would be sending a card to someone recently bereaved and including a particular verse, intended to bring comfort and strength.
- At other times the Bible sets the agenda: a passage which is provided in a lectionary, or Bible reading notes, or in a sermon, challenges us to action which we had not anticipated. It shapes and changes our life and faith.

It is important that the preaching should model both uses of Scripture and show how Christians can appropriate both ways of using the Bible in their own lives.

The public reading of the Bible

It is ironic that among Evangelicals (those people who, above all, see themselves as 'Bible people') there is so little enthusiasm for the public reading of the Bible. In many an evangelical church the Bible reading is kept to a minimum: only one passage is likely to be read and the passage will be kept as short as possible. If feasible, a drama sketch might replace the reading altogether. There is plenty of enthusiasm for preaching, of course, but as a tutor at theological college once said to me, 'You can preach the best sermon ever, but the only thing in the service *guaranteed* to be inspired is the Bible reading that precedes it.'

There are, of course, good reasons for wariness about too much Bible reading in worship. Among churches that are keen to reach out beyond the regulars, to the 'unchurched' and those on the fringe, there is a genuine concern that lots of Bible, read out of context, will do no good and may do some harm. But the result is a model of the Bible in worship which sees it simply as a peg on which to hang a sermon. Evangelicals would, no doubt, agree that there can be no better thing on which to base a sermon, but is this the best and most appropriate use of the Bible? If the Bible is only for sermons (one might reason), what use is it to persons other than preachers and contexts other than sermons? More seriously for the long-term health of the church, what assumptions does this form among worshippers about the place of the Bible? The three-year lectionaries work on the assumption that the reading of Scripture *itself*, regardless of its relation to preaching, is vitally important. Its lack of coherent 'themes' linking all the readings on a Sunday is deliberate. It is one outworking of a philosophy that considers each reading to be important in its own right and in its biblical context, rather than seeing readings as a means to the end of presenting a tidy theme for preaching.

Yet, even with the plethora of English language versions available to make the Bible easier to understand (the latest of which to take off in a big way is the Contemporary English Version, a version that specifically states that it is designed for reading out loud), many evangelical churches provide a diet of one reading per service (or perhaps two if it is a communion service), designed to feed the sermon.

Michael Vasey, in his important but much overlooked Grove booklet, *Reading the Bible at the Eucharist*, outlined the *symbolic* importance of the reading of the Bible:

... the public reading of Scripture gives physical expression to the church's acceptance of the Bible as the 'oracles of God', intended by him not only for its original audience but also for us... It is an acknowledgement that the

message and teaching of Jesus found decisive and authoritative expression in apostolic teaching, teaching inspired by the Holy Spirit and set out for us in these 'sacred writings'.

That the public reading of Scripture has a symbolic side to it has many implications worth exploring. Ritual and symbol are different from teaching and explanation; they need some element of repetition and rely on meanings embodied in actions. The custom of three readings at communion in the usual order embodies (and therefore teaches) theological truths about God's revelation and about the way the parts of Scripture belong together. Reading the gospel last embodies the centrality of Jesus Christ in the Christian understanding of Scripture.⁶

Within the Church of England (as well as within and across other denominations) there are churches that are strong on the symbolic aspect of the reading of Scripture. They are likely to have two or perhaps three readings, plus a psalm. They may well have a large 'book of the Gospels' from which the readings are read and which may well be brought into the service as part of an opening procession. There may be a procession and alleluia acclamations at the reading of the Gospel, and the congregation may turn towards the reader. Of course, the question must still be asked, whether this symbolic centrality of the Bible is lived out, either in the preaching that follows or in the life of that congregation, in the way it handles difficult issues and pastoral crises.

By contrast, a neighbouring church might see itself as completely biblical in its preaching, its congregational life, and the individual lives of its members. Yet in its worship the Bible may feature as little more than a short passage to prepare for the sermon, read with little ceremony and with nothing to indicate that it is a significant event in its own right. The taking of the collection may 'feel' more weighty.

On the whole Evangelicals know how to make the *sermon* feel significant: it is preceded by a prayer; it is also followed by a prayer, and possibly a time of silence; it is responded to in song; prayers later in the service may take up the theme. Perhaps we need to take more care over ways in which we can increase the impact and the symbolic status of the Scriptures when they are read. Two or three readings need not *necessarily* be too much for the congregation if they are introduced appropriately, if they are read with understanding and a sense of drama, and if they are followed by a silence and perhaps some other response (such as song). Many churches use the main reading on a Sunday (and the accompanying sermon) as the key text for home groups, cell groups or other midweek small group discussion. What about using those groups to focus, not on the passage which was preached, but on another passage, which was read publicly but not the focus of the sermon? Michael Vasey again:

Three further features of the Roman Catholic [reforms following the Second Vatican Council] deserve a mention. One is the revival of responsorial psalm singing as a way of responding to the reading. A second is the careful concern for the presentation of readings and the promotion of acclamations, responses,

6 Michael Vasey, *Reading the Bible at the Eucharist*, Grove Books, Nottingham 1986, p 16.

antiphons, gestures, posture and silence 'to promote active participation' by the people. A third is the revival of the ministry of lector or reader and a giving of appropriate training for what is seen as a spiritual ministry.⁷

I have already mentioned above the possibility of responding to the readings with song (and a psalm could fulfil the same need, whether sung or said) as one way of taking the reading itself seriously. 'Acclamations, antiphons, gestures, posture' may not be quite the style of many evangelical churches, but the desire to make the reading of the Bible engaging for all must surely be part of our agenda. Apart from a brief burst of energy and creativity when *The Dramatised Bible*⁸ first came out, there seems to have been a loss of nerve and a retreat into a view which sees the public reading of the Bible as a bit of a waste of time, something to be kept to a minimum.

One of the main problems underlying the liturgy of the word today is precisely the culturally alien character of listening. One response would be to abandon public reading as a culturally inappropriate mode of communication. Another is to assert that *public reading is an activity required by the character of the Scripture* as well as the nature of the liturgical assembly.⁹

However, if the focus of the reading of a passage on Sunday is not the sermon (a sermon which might be focused on one of the other readings) then the question of whether it was immediately accessible and whether it made perfect sense becomes less important than the fact that it was read and heard. How easy or difficult it was to grasp could then become a launchpad for a lively discussion in a small group context later in the week. The church is seen to put itself under the authority of the whole Bible, not just the parts that make easy sermons.

Part of the problem with making the Scripture symbolically significant in the main act of worship is that all the symbolism that springs to mind carries with it the cultural and theological baggage of a form of the catholic tradition that is not immediately appealing to most Evangelicals. But symbolism can be reinvented and reapplied. A church in Salisbury rethought from scratch the symbolism that accompanies its liturgy, which was previously of a pretty traditional Anglican pattern. So at the beginning of the service they no longer process in with candles. Instead, a candle on a stand is placed in advance on each side of the lectern. They determined that these candles would signify the focus of the liturgy at each stage in the service (and at the Peace the candles are moved to stand adjacent to the holy table, to signify the shift of focus in the service at that point). A large Gospel book (it could have been a Bible) is carried in the procession (sometimes by a child, sometimes by an adult). During the Gathering part of the communion service they use a simple biblical verse and response, the gospel book is placed on the lectern and the candles there are lit: the focus is moving to the liturgy of the Word. Children's leaders at this point outline the themes of the learning which will take place in their groups (which generally follow the passages being read in the church) and the preacher may say

7 Vasey, *Reading the Bible*, p 15.

8 Michael Perry, ed., *The Dramatised Bible*, Marshall Pickering, London 1989.

9 Michael Vasey, 'Scripture and Eucharist', in David Holeton, ed., *Our Thanks and Praise: The Eucharist in Anglicanism Today*, Anglican

Book Centre, Toronto 1998, p 151 (emphasis mine). It would be interesting to reflect on what this means for congregations of, or including, Christians who are deaf. It would be interesting to reflect on what this means for congregations of, or including, Christians who are deaf.

something about the sermon. They stopped having a gradual hymn, and replaced it with a period of silence between the first reading and the Gospel. These changes in symbolism were intended to bring a fresh coherence between the symbolic aspects of the service and their practical desire for a strong emphasis on the importance of reading from the Bible and preaching God's word.

The third of the changes Vasey highlights in Roman Catholic practice is the taking seriously of the ministry of lector (unfamiliar terminology, but one that avoids confusion with the office of Reader in the Church of England). It is hard to produce any long-term improvement in the quality of the public reading of the Bible without giving time to training a core group of people for whom this is a significant part of their service to the church. Such a group can be given training not only in the practicalities of voice projection or using the PA system, but in understanding the genre, purpose and meaning of passages of Scripture, and how to convey this in their reading in a way that draws attention to the Scripture and not to them. Within the Roman Catholic church this focus on a particular ministry has spawned resources to support it:

- training materials;
- books which provide short introductions to the readings that put them in context; and
- books that print the readings with background information to increase understanding and even give hints about breathing, pronunciation and when to leave pauses.¹⁰

One of the advantages of the *Revised Common Lectionary* and its *Common Worship* variant is that Roman Catholic resources such as these become useful in our own context for most weeks of the year. Such an approach to reading the Bible in church might seem like overkill, but it shows a seriousness about the importance of the public reading of the Bible that is lacking in many 'Bible-believing' churches.

One of the advantages of a trained and properly prepared reader of the Scripture passage is that after a silence the reader might be encouraged to mention briefly their own response to that passage: 'I learned...'; 'I was confused by...'; 'I was challenged to...'. In such a way the importance of personal response to the word of God is modelled, and modelled as something that 'ordinary' Christians can do, not just preachers.

Spoken Words and Songs

Much of the biblical content of any act of worship will come not through the Bible readings and sermon, but through the accompanying songs, hymns and spoken texts. The influence of hymnody in forming Christians theologically has been much studied, and was much used, for instance, by the Wesley brothers as a tool in the development of Methodism.¹¹

10 See, for instance, Aelred Rosser, *Workbook for Lectors and Gospel Readers Year A*, Liturgy Training Publications, Chicago 1995.

11 Two recent publications which explore the impact of song in forming Christians are

Brian Wren, *Praying Twice*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville 2000 and Rosalind Brown, *How Hymns Shape Our Lives* (Grove Spirituality Series No.78), Grove Books Ltd., Cambridge 2001.

It is often claimed that the liturgy of the Church of England is equally suffused with biblical quotation and allusion, and an afternoon working through the service books with a concordance at your side soon proves the truth of the claim – as much in *Common Worship* as in *The Book of Common Prayer*. In songs and liturgical texts (spoken or sung) we use the Bible not as words to be heard but as words to be spoken, taking the words of Scripture and using them as our own words for praise, lament or prayer. Such a use of Scripture, corporately owned and oft repeated, is just one way of fulfilling the apostle Paul's injunction to 'let the word of Christ dwell in you richly' (Col. 3:16).

One of the most obvious examples would be the use of biblical canticles (literally 'little songs') and the psalms. It is ironic that recent resources (such as *The Promise of His Glory*, *Patterns for Worship*, *Celebrating Common Prayer* and the brand new *Common Worship: Daily Prayer*) have increased the number and scope of these biblical canticles at just the time when their use (particularly as *songs*) is decreasing rapidly, so that they are neither known nor being taught.

The pattern is similar with regard to the psalms, that other traditional mainstay of 'Anglican' worship. It is significant that A Service of the Word, which covers all forms of non-eucharistic Sunday and weekday worship (other than pastoral services such as funerals) requires the use of a psalm, or, 'if occasion demands, a scriptural song' (*Common Worship* main edition p 24). This is an instruction rarely complied with.

The *Common Worship* principal service lectionary includes psalmody for each Sunday and major festival. A small number of churches will read it or chant it or sing it in some way. Few of those churches will be evangelical. Yet the absence of the psalms from our preaching and our worship ought to be an issue of great concern to us. The purple passages get some treatment by being used in metrical versions or worship songs, though I suspect that congregations are mostly ignorant of the origin of some of these songs and hymns. This is better than nothing, but I have yet to see Psalm 58 ('O God, break the teeth in their mouths...' etc.) receive the Matt Redman treatment. And yet it is just the passages like these – the hardest ones to handle – that are most essential for us to engage with. The nearest the contemporary church gets to handling these sorts of 'difficult' issues is in some of the material from the Wild Goose worship group. This material is not necessarily directly derived from biblical texts, though it often echoes biblical passages in its ability to make us feel uncomfortable.¹²

Not all psalms make for good songs of praise to put in the mouths of a contemporary congregation, but the range of emotion and mood expressed in the psalms ought to find expression somewhere in our worship, our preaching and our public reading of the Bible. A small step would be to use the psalm as an additional reading, even if we can't find it in us to chant or sing it. At another level, it is vital that the element of longing and desire, which is such an essential part of the eschatological in Scripture, should find expression not only in the content of particular texts but also in the 'feel' and mood of our worship, not least in the intercessions.

12 For instance, the uncompromising 'A Touching Place' by John Bell and Graham Moule: 'Feel for the parents who've lost their child, feel for the women whom men have defiled...'

How can we find a place in worship for this sort of material? In an era in which the growing 'spirituality' of the surrounding culture values honesty and the sharing of feelings (including negative ones) it is vital that the church reveals and models in its worship a refreshing biblical honesty about the state of the world and the difficulty of living in it, rather than a shallow and unreal triumphalism which (naturally enough, at a time when we are trying to reach out to those beyond the church) tends to focus on the positives of the Christian life. The new edition of *Patterns for Worship*¹³ will include within it a selection of psalms, designed for speaking rather than singing, in a number of different styles and idioms. Part of the aim is to include psalms that express anger, lament, frustration and doubt, as well as the more comfortable praise, hope and faith. Such material ought to be a major resource for a church that wants to connect with the messy realities of life, for believers as much as for those who do not profess the Christian faith. Some churches, for instance, were able to use such material to great effect in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on America in September 2001, when the overriding need was for words which expressed shock, despair and fear, in the context of an abiding trust in the living God.

Some guiding principles

How then can the church (and in particular, the Church of England) order its corporate life and worship in such a way as to engage with the Bible with integrity and allow the Bible to shape us both corporately and individually? Here are some guiding principles:

1. Recover the sense of the Bible as the community's book, designed primarily for proclamation in the hearing of the community and interpretation in the context of the community. This may require a rethink of how personal devotional reading and small group study is related to the reading of Scripture in the main weekly service.
2. Don't allow preaching to overshadow the public reading of the Bible. This may require fresh thinking about who reads the Bible in church and how it is read, with consequent training implications. It may also require a rethink of how the reading of the Scripture can be enhanced symbolically so that it coheres with its theoretical and practical importance.
3. Consider how the Bible is used in those words (spoken and sung) which are put into the congregation's mouth as part of the praise and worship.
4. Don't forget that a truly biblical church is one in which the *way* that the Bible is used is considered as carefully as the biblical content of the words which are listened to, spoken and sung.

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¹³ Expected to be published in autumn 2002.

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