



## FROM THE BISHOP

# Reading the Bible as Anglicans

If you have ever used the London Underground, you would be familiar with the phrase “mind the gap”. The announcement is meant to draw attention to the dangerous gap between the train and the platform, which a traveller ignores at their own peril. Whenever I look at the Scriptures I’m aware of another gap. The gap between the world in which the text was written and my world as a reader. Either consciously or unconsciously, those who teach and preach from the scriptures are constantly negotiating this gap. As they interpret the words of the Scriptures and apply them to life today, the preacher’s words become the lens through which to view the Scriptures. This has always been a challenging and even dangerous exercise, as evidenced by the fact that in 1542 and again in 1563 the Reformers were not confident that preachers were up to the task. A series of sermons was authorised for use. A form of this list appears in Article 35 of the Thirty-Nine Articles Religion (see page 833 of APBA). I’ve never heard any of these authorised sermons actually preached in a church, but the existence of the list is evidence of the dangers of making

interpretations from the social and cultural world of the text to the contemporary world of the preacher and his or her listeners.

But of course it’s not just the preacher or teacher who has to take this gap seriously. Once the Scriptures were translated into English or other vernacular languages, they were open to the interpretation of anyone. Hopefully, each of us uses the Bible regularly for personal study and devotional purposes. Much of Scripture is easily understandable because it voices universal sentiments that have a timeless relevance. A reader with no awareness of the background to the text can clearly still gain spiritual solace and insight because of a shared human experience with what the passage narrates. An elderly gentleman to whom I regularly took Home Communion as a Curate hardly needed a degree in Biblical Studies to know that the Psalmist’s words, “If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast” (*Psalms 139:9-10*), deeply resonated with his own reflections as he contemplated the end of his long and faithful life.

Yet if we want to go beyond this devotional use, how do Anglicans understand the scriptures and interpret them for our life today? God communicates with human beings and the Bible is a privileged vehicle of that communication. It is the sacred text of the church. As such, Anglicanism has always cherished scripture and given it a central place in its life and worship. Historically, this is summed up in Article 6 of the 39 Articles, “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation”. For Australian Anglicans this is echoed in the *Fundamental Declarations of the Constitution* which states, “This Church receives all the canonical scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as being the ultimate rule and standard of faith given by inspiration of God and containing all things necessary for salvation”.

Two key words here are inspiration and canonical. Absent from these statements is a definition of the nature of the scriptures or any precise definition of what is meant by inspiration. The general phrase “given by inspiration of God” is in stark contrast to understandings from the Continental Reformers who used phrases like “God

breathed”. Attempts over the years to pin down the nature of the inspiration have not received adequate support within Anglicanism. Yet Anglicans do believe that the Scripture writers were inspired by the Holy Spirit in their work, so we should take seriously their original context. After all, trying to understand what the original author meant honours the divine inspiration of Scripture because the message the writer directed to their times is surely part of God’s inspired communication.

For many, saying that Scripture is God’s inspired revelation includes taking seriously God’s ongoing revelation in the life of the believer as the inspired text is read and in turn, inspires the reader. I draw on an example here from my work over many years as an Examining Chaplain and Vocations Adviser. It is God’s revelation in the Bible that reminds us, as readers or listeners, of God’s call to us (*Jeremiah 1:4-10; Mark 1:16-20*) but our decision, in response to that text, to live out a vocation using our gifts to serve him (*Isaiah 6:8*) is part of God’s ongoing revelation and inspiration in the life of the believer and their community. While the nature of inspiration is an ongoing debate, the

canonical nature of the scriptures is well understood. Over a long period, the church assembled various documents that had good standing within the Christian community, and through a Conciliar or Synodical process, authorised them. So the single book that we know today as the Bible was brought together in and for the church. As Martyn Percy has pointed out, when Paul wrote that “all Scripture is inspired by God” (*2 Timothy 3:16*) in a letter to his friend Timothy, he could hardly have had his own letter in mind at the time. The conferral of canonical status on his letter came much later. Given its emergence through the history of the early church it is hard to believe how some Christians have come to believe that the Bible has come from heaven to earth like a fax. This is not an Anglican understanding because we have always been conscious and respectful of the historical process of compiling what we now know as the Bible (forming the Canon). Yet some find this hard to grasp and, in judgement, readily offer comments like “Anglicans don’t believe in the Bible” or “Anglicans don’t take the Bible seriously”.

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## The Three ‘Worlds’ of the Bible

Here is a suggested way of looking not just at the words on the page but also behind them to the context in which they were written. It also challenges us to think about our own context and perspectives as readers of the text. This approach is based on the writings of Sandra Schneiders in her book *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*. (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1991). Her other helpful book *How to Read the Bible Prayerfully* (Collegeville: 1984) is still in print.

### 1. THE WORLD BEHIND THE TEXT

What do we know about the ancient context of the passage?

- Historical information
- Social systems of the time
- Cultural knowledge

### 2. THE WORLD WITHIN THE TEXT

Focusing on the passage in its context in the Bible.

- How does this passage fit into the larger context of the book or Bible as a whole?
- Who are the key characters in this

passage (or the book in which it is found)?

- What are the issues, themes and purpose of this passage (or the book in which it is found)?
- What kind of literature (genre) do we have here: poetry, narrative, letter, song, etc?

### 3. THE WORLD IN FRONT OF THE TEXT

Thinking about my intended use of the passage and on what I as a reader bring to its interpretation.

- What is my context (situation) and what

kind of spiritual wisdom am I seeking?

- Who am I reading this passage with (or for whom am I preparing this sermon or study)?
- How has this passage been understood by other Christians over the past 2000 years?
- What challenge or invitation do I discern the Spirit offering me (us) through this passage at the moment?

### HELPFUL TIPS

A good Study Bible can help you engage with the

scriptures in this way. Highly recommended here is the *New Oxford Annotated Study Bible* (NRSV). Alternatively, there are plenty of options now in terms of Bible Software, such as Olive Tree [www.olivetree.com](http://www.olivetree.com) or Accordance [www.accordancebible.com](http://www.accordancebible.com).

In addition to this, why not consider requesting a *Bible 360* seminar in your ministry unit or MMR? We have trained *Bible 360* presenters in the diocese. Find out more here [www.formedfaith.org/aboutthe360project](http://www.formedfaith.org/aboutthe360project) or ask your Parish Priest.

## NORTH COAST ANGLICAN

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### CONTACT DETAILS

Editor: Louise Mackay  
PO Box 4 Grafton NSW 2460  
P: (02) 66 424122  
Fax: (02) 66 431814  
Email: [nca@graftondiocese.org.au](mailto:nca@graftondiocese.org.au)

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# Rural Ministry Conference

By The Venerable Tiffany Sparks, Diocesan Archdeacon

In September, leaders from sixteen dioceses gathered to discuss and celebrate the "Glitz" and "Grit" of doing ministry in Remote and Rural Australia. The conference was held in beautiful Blampied an hour and a half north west of Melbourne in the Ballarat diocese. The conference was facilitated by Bishop Matt Brain from Bendigo diocese. We discovered just how vast and remarkable our church is in reaching some of the most geographically isolated people in this land.

Bishop Cam Venebles from the Brisbane diocese presented a survey of the national church in rural and remote Australia. We were collectively amazed to discover that 2 million people live in rural and remote Australia. There was a great sense of how important it is that we continue to reach these Australians with the love of God in Jesus Christ. We heard about the challenging work of reaching and celebrating our first nations people in rural and remote areas. We listened to several presentations from people doing innovative ministry and also the work of BCA around the country. The Primate Archbishop



Philip Freier addressed us on the national church and the importance of being intentional in ministry to rural and remote people. We heard about the importance of having a theology of rural ministry from Bishop Andrew Curnow and the need to ensure safe ministry for vulnerable people. We were invited to comment on draft amendments being presented at general synod

in response to the Royal Commission report. We had an opportunity to share the highs and lows of being faithful to our call as the church to rural and remote Australians and each diocese including ours presented symbols of this. The conference discussed "What's next" for rural and remote ministry as we looked to the future.

The conference has agreed to establish a new network for Anglicans ministering in rural and remote areas to encourage each other and share resources. The meeting also decided to meet again in two years and to promote research papers from within the Australian church to strengthen the learning. For us, as a diocese, the

timing of the conference was fortuitous as we pursue our goals for 'Daring to have a future'. We brought back with us some examples of successful ministry models in rural contexts that will help us in our conversations. I believe we have much to be hopeful about as God moves and shapes our future as a rural diocese in Australia.

## Reading the Bible as Anglicans

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A few years ago there was a project launched in the Anglican Communion to explore how Anglicans of different traditions around the world engage with and interpret scripture. Amongst its many useful insights, the project concluded that what is distinctively Anglican about how we approach Scripture is that Jesus Christ is seen as the living Word of God. At least one Anglican Catechism asks, "Where then is the Word of God to be found in all its fullness?" And the answer: "In Jesus Christ, [God's] only Son, who was made man for us and for our salvation". The ultimate purpose of carefully negotiating the gap is that we might meet and know Jesus Christ.

Another distinctively Anglican way of understanding and engaging with the scriptures is through liturgy (or worship) - a tradition of experiencing and living together in common prayer. As an old Anglican maxim says, "As we pray, so we believe". *The Book of Common Prayer* and its descendants, including *A Prayer Book for Australia* (APBA), each generously use verses from *Scripture as Greetings, Thanksgivings, Invitations and Prayers. The Daily Offices*, including Morning and Evening

Prayer, are filled with Psalms and Canticles. We also follow a Lectionary (itself doctrinal in shape and content) which offers a cyclical series of readings that lead us through a broad sweep of the entire story of God's work in creation, covenant, call and promise, as well as the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. As we move through the liturgical year with its associated Biblical narratives, we are challenged and enabled to interpret this Scripture in the context of our changing world.

Anglican method for interpreting the Bible in our contemporary context also involves the use of reason. The distinctive *Anglican Tripartite of Scripture, Tradition and Reason* acknowledges the authority of scripture but also the role of reason as we live out our faith in each historical moment and context. The apostles were doing this already as they wrestled with the issue of including Gentiles (*Acts 10-15*). The early church used reason as well as Scripture when they settled on the wording of the Creed with its affirmation of the nature of God as Trinity. It took much longer to resolve the issue of slavery, which at the time that the scriptures were written was condoned but in modern times is seen as totally unacceptable.

In the face of criticism from

conservative Christians, William Wilberforce was driven by evangelical fervour to bravely challenge the slave trade on scriptural grounds, despite the fact that the Bible condones and doesn't censure slavery. Wilberforce saw himself as listening for God's word in human experience as well as in the Bible. While we definitely need to avoid the pitfall of seeing the Bible as "just an anthology of influential ideas from antiquity" or even "mere ancient texts that have no connection to issues in modern life", interpretative wisdom is needed when using it to contribute to contemporary social and moral debates. Because the Bible is a lengthy document composed over a long period in diverse contexts, it does not always present a single position on any given issue.

The Anglican way is not blind obedience that ignores the gap between the world in which the Scriptures were written and the world today, but rather it is to seek the mind of Christ by dialoguing with scripture in the light of reason.

Another gap which many are unaware of is that which exists between the world of scholarly engagement with the scriptures and the world of the ordinary Christian. How do we draw on the insights of Biblical scholars in a way that everyone can

reach a deeper understanding and also be enriched in their Christian living? In order to use the Scriptures to discern God's will for us today, an understanding of their original context can help to bring them into conversation with our world. The seed which is the word of God does not produce abundantly even in good soil without some patient and generous tilling (*Luke 8: 11, 15*).

For those who want to know more about our Anglican understandings and methods of engaging with the Bible, I have offered some suggestions for further reading on Page 2. Also, I offer a process that people can use to understand the world of the text and what we bring to it as readers more deeply.

As Anglicans I hope we have a desire to be a true learning community, constantly discovering that new situations call for fresh expressions of a scripturally informed faith and spiritual life.

To conclude, I quote the experience of one Anglican who writes passionately about what happens when we read and explore the Bible together. I pray that this is your experience too.

"...when a bunch of Anglicans read the Bible together—they find themselves in the story, they recognise themselves as

part of God's story, they hear words of judgement, they find challenge and consolation, they recognise Jesus Christ living in themselves, they are moved to prayer, and discover the longing for forgiveness and community and hope. ...what took place that afternoon was also in continuity with the long history, beginning with the day of Pentecost, of Christians reading the scriptures together. For a few chaotic moments the Word of God was present with us in all the power of the Holy Spirit, and our lives were touched, and we knew deliverance and healing again from Jesus Christ, God's only Son, who became human for us, and for our salvation. For all these things, thanks be to God."

+Murray

### Suggested Further Reading

*Lost in Translation? Anglicans, Controversy and the Bible: Perspectives from the Doctrine Commission of the Anglican Church of Australia.* Scott Cowdell, Muriel Porter. Desbooks, Thornbury, [Vic.] 2004.

*What is the Anglican Tradition: Scripture.* Walter Deller. (An article available from the Bishop's Office)