

1. We don't always get our reading of Scripture right!

You may have heard of the child who, when asked what do we learn from the Parable of the Lost Sheep, replied, 'That one sinner is worth more than 99 Christians.'.... But we can too easily take the wrong meaning from Scripture, blinded by our selves or our cultures.

We know there are dark moments in Christianity's history; the church's response in the past to slavery and to women, name two areas of controversy. Both were justified based on readings of Scripture.

We can rightly look back and feel angry or frustrated with how the church behaved. Yet it is also a reminder for us all – if we have an ounce of humility – we must be ready to accept that we have some inherited assumptions which (probably? definitely?) cloud the meaning and direction we take from Scripture.

We need to understand: we are Word and Spirit people! By that I mean we read the Scriptures, we use the Scriptures as a foundation for the faith we follow. But we also understand that the Spirit moves where it will, and, regarding reading the Scriptures, the Spirit is constantly leading us into new ways of understanding and interpreting them for our time.

2. The Pharisees – the religious teachers of their day – got their reading of Scripture wrong!

We get to see an angry Jesus today – angry at how they have interpreted the Scriptures in a narrow way which misses the big picture. The Old Testament laws of purity had some practical application – eat with clean hands, wash food – but there was also a spirituality about them. The idea was to remind the people that the God who had been revealed to them was *different* to all the other deities that people worshipped around them. And to help them remember this, they should practice customs which reminded them of being *different*.

The fundamental point of the rules was to remember who God was! But the Pharisees have skewed the culture so that they now say that the way to know God is through these customs! Jesus says no: the way to know God is to live the life God calls us to. That is, your love of others is how you will connect with God, not what you put inside yourself. The Pharisees have a blind spot in their reading of Scripture. It needs repair.

3. 2,500 years ago in the kingdom of Northern Israel, people found themselves in a mess!

Their kingdom had divided after its high point during the time of King David. The northern kingdom had become wayward and now at risk of invasion by Assyrians from north and Judah from south. It was a turbulent time – kings died violently (assassinations), there was corruption, social and economic abuse. Ordinary people might have a mixture of sadness or depression (what is happening?) and maybe even guilt (I have a part in this?)

The prophet Hosea speaks into this moment. What does he see as the problem? (v1): ***'Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel; for the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land.'***

The people of their time seem to have ignored the call of their Scriptures and Hosea says this is the problem. But the problems they have brought on themselves affects all the creation (v.3): ***'Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing.'*** Hosea sees the connectedness between the affairs of humans and the whole creation. Misreading/ignorance of their Scriptures has led to problems for Israel and for all creation. We have a different context, but it is perhaps even clearer the connection between our human behaviour and the devastation of the earth. What we do affects the rest of creation!

4. For many years, with a few exceptions, we have to admit that the Christian church has often missed this connection between human action and the rest of creation. We may have understood our calling is to look out for other humans, but we have not seen our Christian (indeed, human) calling to look out for all creation. Fortunately, the church has in recent years been waking up to this call! It is re-reading passages such as the one we read today from Paul's letter to the Romans which have challenged us afresh. We have had a blind spot in our reading of Scripture. It needs repair!

The letter to the Romans is the longest of Paul's letters. It is magisterial in its sweep. And the basic question Paul is answering is this: is God trustworthy? This God who promised freedom for the Jewish people – well, they are now under Roman rule! And anyway, what about those who aren't Jews Paul? Paul is convinced: Jesus – in his life, his death and resurrection – has shown us that God is trustworthy: the risen Jesus, has established a new way of living by the Spirit and ushered in a new age in the life of creation.

But you don't have to look far to question whether that new age has really come! Isn't all this talk just 'pie in the sky' dreaming on Paul's part? He grapples with this question as he writes this chapter. You could look at all the bad stuff going on around you, the degradation of the planet and say, 'what hope is there?' Alternatively, you could also say, 'well it's not that important, it's the spiritual life that counts... not this earthly life (whatever that means!), let's just learn how to live in a 'spiritual cocoon' and do all we can to isolate ourselves from the problems of this earth'. There were people who said that then; some live like that now.

Paul buys into neither of these ways of being. He says, no, this is where we learn what Christian *hope* is! And he uses this wonderful image of childbirth. Childbirth is an immensely hopeful and loaded time: loaded with all sorts of hopes and dreams about what this new little life might bring. But it is also painful! Everyone I know who has experienced childbirth or been beside a loved one giving birth for the first time, talks of the utter astonishment, the utter pain, which came alongside this time of giving birth to new life. Paul says (v22-23): ***'We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.'***

So the frustrations, the struggles we each face (as individuals, as communities) are all linked with the struggles the creation faces. Paul says, we need to live into the hope that new life is being borne, even despite our negligence.

The Christian leaders who have written a reflection for this year's Season of Creation say this: ***'Along with our Sister, Mother Earth, creatures of all kinds, including humans, cry out because of the consequences of our destructive actions causing climate crisis, loss of biodiversity, and human suffering as well as Creation's suffering. And yet, there is hope and the expectation for a better future. To hope in a biblical context does not mean to stand still and quiet, but rather groaning, crying, and actively striving for new life amidst the struggles. Just as in childbirth, we go through a period of intense pain, but new life is coming forth.'***

5. We will explore more concretely what this 'hope' might look like in the next two weeks. But for the moment, let us live with that image of childbirth. Let us be people who as we read the news, see the impacts, don't stand still and be quiet, but 'rather groan, cry and actively strive for new life amidst the struggles.'