

Scripture in a Changing Society

Reflections of the work in the Australia Region

(Background: The Australian group was based in Melbourne, since that city includes two theological colleges with Anglican links, Ridley and Trinity. The 'tyranny of distance' which shapes Australian life limited physical contact with other areas. The group met twice, and supported the Coordinator in researching Anglican media, gauging congregational use of the Bible through theological students' experience of field education, a weekend conference for science practitioners and hearing from bishops and diocesan educators. The BILC study book 'And it was Good' was used in several dioceses in Lent 2012, but time has prevented analysis of its impact on participants' awareness of how they use the Bible. This Reflection draws on the insights derived from the above inputs.)

Major shifts have come about in Australian society since the mid-20th century: the Depression, successive wars – from WW1 to Afghanistan – the emergence of 'teenage' sub-cultures, ongoing large-scale immigration, the revival of indigenous communities, colour TV, the internet, smart phones etc. The Catholic-Protestant sectarianism which scarred the nation until the 1960s has faded, partly as church and society have shifted steadily apart over the past half-century. Widespread biblical illiteracy, and a growing gap between 'thoughtful' theology and 'popular-faith' Christianity, has been the outcome of these changes.

Australian Anglicans generally hear the scriptures in much the same way as other Anglicans, through the Sunday lectionary. But given the background traced above, much of this is heard as individual pieces rather than within an overall 'architecture' of the Bible story as a whole. The extent to which the public reading of the scriptures engages people's living as Christians is hard to assess, but interest levels appear to be high, and the standard of reading aloud is generally good. Since 1977 Sunday readings have been based on Vatican II's 'Three-Year' system, and since 1995 on the Revised Common Lectionary. Educational materials which support these readings range from local authors' commentaries – especially on the Gospels – to special Lent and Advent studies produced by mission agencies. During Lent, in most parishes group Bible studies are offered, though this typically involves less than half the regular worshippers.

The exception to these patterns is most congregations in the Dioceses of Armidale and Sydney, and some elsewhere whose leaders identify the parish concerned as 'evangelical'. Usual practice in these is 'Bible teaching' from sequential reading of a biblical book. Done well, it has the clear benefit of congregations becoming more informed as to the content and application of these parts of the scriptures. Weaknesses include an overly didactic ethos, over-emphasis on the epistles, and setting aside the rhythm of the Christian year.

At the personal level, it must be acknowledged that many regular worshippers do not encounter the scriptures apart from hearing them in Sunday worship. Many Australian Anglican clergy and some lay people use the Daily Lectionary: this covers the New Testament each year in full, and the Old Testament and Apocrypha in large part over two years; the Psalter is read on a two-month cycle. Many Anglicans – especially laypeople of evangelical conviction – use daily reading notes such as from Scripture Union, Every Day with Jesus and the like. Family Bible reading, where experienced, is seen as helpful: but this tradition was largely left behind a generation back.

Australian Anglicans do not appear to be all that different from other parts of the English-speaking Communion in relation to their use of the Bible. Those who have experienced formal theological education – which today includes significant numbers of lay people – are more nuanced in their use of the scriptures than others, and well aware of the issues surrounding their interpretation. Those Anglicans who identify with the evangelical tradition – most notably across Sydney diocese – are distinctive in giving 'Bible teaching' the highest priority in both their ecclesial and personal practice.

Gender issues have led to a succession of high-level studies on how the Bible is to be used, which have found their way into parish life. In the 70s and 80s they focused on the ordination of women, discussions which in large part led to Sydney's distinctive position on how the Bible 'works'. More recently, gender discussion has turned to consider gay relationships.

To what extent these reasonably accessible academic works reflect grass-roots Australian Anglican opinion and biblical usage it is hard to say. If Letters to the Editor and articles in the diocesan magazines are taken as evidence, then although the Anglican Church of Australia is a long way from resolution of the formal issues of same-sex blessing and ordination, while some dioceses are strongly 'conservative' on the issues, significant numbers of congregations would appear to be 'gay-friendly' without becoming ideological.

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