

Pushing back against the Bible – by Robert Cotton - 23 September

I came across a new phrase the other day. It may be familiar to you but I had not heard it before: “push back”. I was sitting in a Bishop’s Council meeting, listening to a debate about the diocesan budget and trying not to drop off to sleep. Suddenly, someone said rather forcibly “I want to push back on a couple of matters”. My ears pricked up – what did he mean? From what happened later, the phrase seems to be a polite way of saying “Hang on a moment. You may see XYZ like that, but what about ABC?” It’s a way of stopping someone in their tracks and investigating another perspective.

This came to mind as I have been discussing recently how to understand Jesus’ parables. Sometimes Jesus tells a story that feels rather unfair. One of my colleagues was struggling to accept one of the parables as “gospel truth”, whereas I wanted to encourage him to push back against the parable. For example, in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, although we love the example of the forgiveness of the younger brother, we may feel some sympathy for the older son, and feel that he has been treated less than admirably. Or in the Parable of the The Labourers in the Vineyard, the owner finishes by saying to those who had worked all day “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?” (Matthew 20.15). My response includes wanting to push back and say “you can – but beware of the consequences”.

So my question is: can we push back against the Bible? Is it disrespectful or even fundamentally wrong to challenge what scripture is saying to us? If we feel uncomfortable doing this, we should seek to understand why. Are we assuming that Scripture is directly given to us by God and that our role is merely to receive and obey? Are we assuming that the Bible is true? ‘True’ is such a big word: claiming that the Psalms are ‘true’ is very different from claiming that the history books of the Old Testament (or, even, Genesis) are true. The assumption that the Bible is true can lead us to think that it is ‘simply true’, so all we have to do is ‘simply believe’. What I am trying to recognise is that the status of the Bible is not simple, and so it is fine to push back – to ask for further clarification.

Some say that the Bible should form us as a Master forms the working life of an Apprentice, training the youngster in skills and in attitude as well deepening knowledge. Indeed, the Psalms in particular are used daily in prayer to help form and give shape to our imagination. By reading them daily we become disciples who are better able to sympathise with others, to confess our misdemeanours and to offer thanksgiving (because we are using psalms that enter deeply into these experiences). Nevertheless, there are passages in the Bible which should not be used as models for our behaviour. For example the Canaanites and the Egyptians are regularly on the receiving end of ill-will from the House of Israel, all done in the name of God. It is reasonable (if not, even, *required* of us) to ask: “but did God actually want that to happen?”

Perhaps the finest example of pushing back against those who claim to speak God's word actually comes in the Bible itself, in the book of Job. All sorts of tragedies have struck Job who, in his pain, shouts at God. Job's counsellors try to persuade him that, since God is fair, Job must have sinned and done something wrong. The counsellors live in a well-ordered world where good things happen to good people and bad to bad. Job's story is archetypal in its recognition of the unfairness and tragedy in the world. The resolution comes when Job meets God face to face. As with many people in deep pain, the moment that they realise that they are not alone – and will never be abandoned – brings great relief. So Job pushes back against a too-simple theology, to find a surer relationship with God after these arguments are settled.

And yet, that cannot be the end of the story for everyone. I have seen since people 'lose' their faith, not because of one particular tragic moment, but because they start to see tragedy as unending. When innocent, vulnerable people suffer great pain, without the miraculous sudden appearance of God, it can be hard to continue to believe in a loving, all-knowing, compassionate God. This experience is saying that what we need not only to be connected to God, but also we long for some sort of reliability. The odd tragedy doesn't shake our faith too much; endless tragedies do. So, as we take Job's argument one step further, we are demanding of God both connection and reliability. The ancient hymn of the church called the "Te Deum Laudamus" finishes "O Lord, in thee have I trusted: let me never be confounded".

So the world is full of complex, conflicting situations; to cope with these we need a whole range of reactions from God. The Church's tradition (and its ministers) need to be resourceful knowing how to bring, for example, comfort, challenge, encouragement, sustenance and peace at different times and seasons. The Bible speaks with many voices and gives us a huge range of resources for all sorts of troubles we face. We need to be inspired to be able to draw on the ideas of the Bible in the best way in varying circumstances.

Sometimes we may hear words from the Bible that seem inappropriate. At those moments, it is imperative that we push-back. Indeed, that is what Job did; we are being faithless if we are too scared to say to God (and God's Word): "Hang on a moment. What about seeing this differently?"

So, challenge the Bible, and then pray that you will hear a deeper truth.