

An argument – by Mary Alexander – 12 August 2011

I got into an argument in the pub recently, about religion. This does not normally happen to me, and my first reaction was to make my excuses and leave. I'd only gone in early in the evening to leave some fliers for the tile-signing at St. Mary's and my George Abbot lecture. A drinker saw the name 'George Abbot' and asked if it wasn't a school. I explained, then he noticed the name of the church. 'Don't you think the Bible is like *The Lord of the Rings*?' I didn't, but thought it best to ask what he meant. 'Well, it's a fantasy novel, isn't it?' I really did not want to get involved, but thought that was lily-livered, so stuck it out. 'Dare to be a Daniel' came into my head from somewhere: my Victorian great aunts? The one who married the clergyman and banned unmarried mothers from their baby's christening?

Spine stiffened, I decided I must stick up for the Bible. I suggested that the Bible was history, or that some of the Old Testament was thought by people at the time to be history. I agreed that stories like Adam and Eve, or the Flood, were not historical but were ways of putting across an important idea. He leapt on that as proving his point. The kindly barman remarked that I had only come in to deliver the fliers, but it was a discussion, not an argument, and I didn't mind. I pointed out that the New Testament was true. I wish I could have made more convincing points, but he wasn't really listening. He was absorbed by his idea of the Bible as a fantasy novel. We talked a lot more and eventually his Goth girlfriend got involved and asked where St. Mary's was. I seized the flier and showed her the photo so she would recognize it, and invited them both to come along to St. Mary's or Holy Trinity. They were, inevitably, 'not religious, but spiritual'.

Why is it that a fantasy novel can be more compelling than the Bible? A novel perhaps has a more coherent structure, but the Bible is a whole series of stories leading up to climax of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Had my friend ever read the Bible? (I didn't think to ask that at the time.) It seems so sad that people clearly want something spiritual but would never consider turning to the Church to find it.

What more should I have said? Perhaps you could think about the Bible and whether it's like a fantasy novel. There are certainly some amazing things in it. A talking serpent, a burning bush, pillars of cloud and fire leading people on a quest, people being tested, like Abraham and Isaac, then all the miracles in the New Testament. It's got fights, battles, great friendships and betrayals, love and disappointments. There are strong people and weak, heroes and those who try to run away. All these can be found in novels, but the most amazing thing of course, is the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This is all true, and is the basis for a much more satisfying spiritual life than any fantasy novel.

