

I'll place my cards on the table: St Paul is a difficult author. At times he is hard to understand; at times he is notorious for some negative attitudes. He can appear self-centred ("Be imitators of me as I am of Christ" 1 Corinthians 11.1). He seems to be dismissive of women ("Christ is head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife", or 'women should cover their heads in worship' 1 Corinthians 11.3-5). He sounds judgemental (Romans 1.24-27).

Therefore I would not be surprised if you shared the same fundamental approach to the Bible as me. I value the Gospels as giving me the most immediate access to Jesus himself, and I love some of the Old Testament for the wonderful stories, and challenging prophets who give us hope and a vision of a better world. I act on this attitude in my choice of readings for worship in the parish. In St Mary's we routinely have an Old Testament and a Gospel reading. At Holy Trinity, on the Sundays when we need to drop one of the three set readings, I nearly always discard the Epistle.

This contribution to the Bible Journal is written to explore these attitudes a little deeper. Since the Epistles were written at least 20 years earlier than the Gospels, are we missing out on valuable evidence of the exciting time that the newest Christian communities were pioneering ways of being faithful disciples of Christ? Anyway, am I just being too hard on Paul, making the typical mistake of picking up on 1% of his writing (his "mistakes", or, at least, his slips) rather than focussing on the heart of his work? Indeed I only have to mention these passages to show how wonderful Paul can be:

- Philippians 4.4-7: 'Rejoice in the Lord always'.
- 1 Corinthians 13: the great hymn to love, so familiar yet so profound
- Galatians 3.28: the touchstone of inclusiveness
- Colossians 3: If Christ is risen, then so are we.

Paula Gooder, in the Study Day she will be leading at St Mary's on March 5th, will be exploring how we should see Paul as a mystic, a theologian, a pioneer or a pastor? Since his writings cover this range of styles (and more) is it not surprising that some of his texts resonate deeply with us – most in a positive way, and yet some jar and hurt us? I am not wanting to exculpate Paul and thereby imply that our attitude is wrong. But I have to ask: why do we expect Paul to be perfect? How ready are we to acknowledge his greatness as well as recognising his faults?

I believe we may find this difficult, not because of Paul's own character, but because his writings are in the New Testament. Since the Epistles are in the Bible, and the Bible is somehow "right", we seem forced to have the attitude that Paul is correct in all his words. Let us see if we can pick this apart a bit. Let's see if we can still acknowledge that the Bible is special, inspired and authoritative – and also contains sentences and moments that we find distasteful (or even more: unworthy of the God we worship). After all, we do this reasonably easily with the Old Testament. When we read the stories of the Israelites being commended to slay the Amalekites (or whoever), we may at first feel 'I wish this was not part of the Bible' – but we can move on quite quickly to being able to explain to ourselves or others why it's being in the Bible is not that troubling: we'll say 'that's how they told stories 3000 years ago', or 'they may have thought that God told

them to slay the Amalekites, but did God actually do so?', or 'It's a brief story, barely relevant to the overall narrative of a loving, creative, just God'.

So, putting it bluntly, in what ways is the Bible authoritative? If we only treat the Bible as similar to an old fashioned headmaster telling us plainly what to do and demanding immediate obedience, I believe we are backing ourselves in to a spiritual and emotional corner.

1. The Bible is authoritative as it is the best witness to historical events that display God's unfolding relationship with the chosen people of the Old and New Testaments. It is the best evidence we have, but it is not often in the form of eye-witness accounts. So we have to honour it as the closest we can get to key events, as well as respecting its own context, limitations and intentions.
2. The Bible is authoritative because it is worth listening to again and again. Over the last 3000 years, Jews and Christians have returned to these texts time and time again for wisdom, challenge and hope. Each generation has then sought to apply this, moulding lives of faithfulness and obedience. But the Bible deserves "a good listening to" as it is likely that when we do that, we will begin to discern afresh God's will for our lives today. True obedience takes us way beyond merely "doing what someone says"; it requires listening, attentiveness and discernment from us.
3. The bible is authoritative because it is authentic. Similarly, if you meet a profoundly good person, you not only see that goodness, but also you can recognise authenticity, "no guile", or "being true to him/her own self" (whichever phrase you wish to use). Such behaviour has an innate authenticity. That is what they saw in Jesus and said "this man speaks with an authority unlike the Scribes and the Pharisees". There are times that the Bible points us to seemingly unattainable ideals (such as in the Sermon on the Mount, or with the prophets). We may not be able to live like that all the time, but we can become better people by being challenged by the presence of such goodness.

Recognising the Bible's authority as more "inspiration" than "sledgehammer" will help us with Paul.

First, he wants us to know the traditions about Jesus (1 Corinthians 15.1-3), passing on to us what he himself has received. Paul is a crucial figure in the early years of the Christian faith, but he did not invent it; we must treat him as a signpost and not as gospel truth.

Secondly, keep in mind how Paul himself founded churches. He arrived in a city, stayed for some months, drew together a core group of believers, taught, prayed and encouraged – and then left. His epistles were often occasioned by things going wrong: not chiefly because the churches were behaving badly, but rather that they were falling away from attending to the primary message of "God in Christ". Paul could not run their lives for them, nor should we expect him to do that for us now. But we are worthy of criticism if we stop attending to God's call to live faithful, dedicated lives.

Thirdly, we need the courage and honesty to discern when Paul's words are being authentic today. I do not believe that Paul would have written some of the "bad" passages (judgemental and dismissive of women) today. If these ring false to our ears today, then we must have the strength to push-back against Paul and say so. There is plenty in Paul to challenge Paul. I am not implying that we modern western Christians have a firmer grasp on truth than Paul, but we are called to be in conversation with him.

Paul was a radical. He broke the constraints so that Gentiles could become followers of Christ without becoming Jews first. Without that the Church would have remained a tiny Jewish sect. But like all radicals, Paul was innovative in some areas and conservative in others. It is our responsibility to recognise the difference, and allow how God used Paul 2000 years ago to shape our lives for good now.