

The Bible as a charter for the human spirit

Reading the Bible to promote human flourishing



Getting started

- * thank you for the invitation
- * choosing a topic relevant to church, ecumenism, as well as to the public square
- * religion scholar specialising in biblical studies
- * priest of a Cathedral in a small regional town
- * explore with you the role of the Bible inside and beyond the communities of spiritual practice we call churches

Proposition

- * The immense cultural and spiritual significance of the Scriptures lies precisely in their capacity to inspire us to move beyond earlier expressions of humanity to reach new levels of awareness, courage and compassion;
- * in short to be *more fully human* than ever before.
- * This is true at both the *individual* and the *collective* level.
- * This truth is not limited to the Christian Bible—in all its variations—but also applies to the sacred texts of all the great spiritual traditions.

A Bible ‘six-pack’

1. The Bible was mostly written by ancient Jews, a few of whom were followers of Jesus although probably none of them had ever seen or heard Jesus during his lifetime.
2. Most of the Bible was prepared for oral presentation via live performance in community gatherings for worship and mutual support (and not for close study by literate and highly educated individuals).
3. The Bible has very little to do with history even though some historical elements are embedded in it.

A Bible ‘six-pack’

4. Decisions on which texts to include in the Bible were mostly determined by political needs of Jewish communities after Alexander the Great and of emerging Catholic Christianity in the third and fourth centuries CE.
5. While the Bible has been used to validate prejudice and oppression of various kinds, it can also be used in ways that enhance humanity and encourage respect for the Earth.
6. The Bible is best read in the company of other people, so that we benefit from the wisdom of others as we seek to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Enhancing humanity

- * While the Bible has been used to validate prejudice and oppression of various kinds, it can also be used in ways that enhance humanity and encourage respect for the Earth.



The process

- * set aside pious/devotional concepts
- * consider the 'real-world' spiritual value of the Bible
- * for people of Christian faith
- * for the SBNRs
- * for those of other faiths
- * for those without faith
- * and for the secular Australian commonwealth

Using the Bible faithfully

- * 'take the Bible seriously while not taking it literally'
- * consciously upping the stakes
- * taking the Bible literally is simply not one valid theological option among several
- * a serious mistake
- * inevitable toxic consequences for the person of faith, for the church, and for the wider society—indeed for our whole fragile biosphere.

Plain speaking

- * no room for mealy-mouthed theological terms
- * this is a festival of wild ideas, right?
- * ask questions, push boundaries, get a sense of the way forward from where we are to where we need to be
- * this is why we meet in a public space
- * our venue invites us to think outside traditional theological boundaries for the sake of us all

Exhibit A: Slavery

Slavery

- * no church would entertain a proposal to reintroduce slavery into our economy and our family structures
- * yet it is good for business and has strong biblical support
- * during the US Civil War churches split over the slavery issue and not all those divisions have yet been healed
- * provides an example of the Bible inspiring a few activists and social advocates to develop new ideas that are controversial, radical, overturn millennia of tradition and involve setting aside some parts of the Bible itself for the sake of a deeper truth
- * sound familiar?

Biblical basis for slavery

- * Embedded in social structures of biblical narratives
- * Includes sexual exploitation of female slaves
- * Hebrews slaves are freed but slavery not condemned
- * Features in parables of Jesus
- * Favourite term to describe our relationship to Jesus
- * Paul, Philemon and Onesimus
- * NT endorses slavery but condemns slave traders

In summary

- * Slavery is assumed, it is regulated by divine laws, it was widely practised, it continues to be accepted even into the NT itself, it provides a core metaphor for the person of faith and for major leaders with the church, and it is even embraced by Jesus as a metaphor for his own mission and purpose.

By comparison

- * This is more than can be said for several other cultural practices that acquire theological significance in the Bible and within later Christian tradition, including:
 - * marriage, divorce, and celibacy
 - * in short, anything involving sex or gender.



RESPONSIBLE SERVICE OF SCRIPTURE

Biblical Literacy

- * how written texts function as acts of communication between and among authors and readers ([genre & communication studies](#))
- * the nature and function of language as we create, share, adopt, implement and adapt human knowledge between individuals and across generations
- * what we know about the composition of the texts that we now value as sacred Scripture ([whose words are they?](#))
- * what we know about the reception of these texts as sacred alongside the exclusion of other texts from those authorised to be read in the liturgy or used to settle theological disputes

Biblical Literacy

- * what we have learned about using these texts from the accumulated experience of 2,500+ years of continuous interpretation of these sacred texts within communities of spiritual practice ([others have read these texts before us](#))
- * what impact our new insights into the physical and social realities of being human in our kind of universe have on our contemporary reception and interpretation of these texts
- * and what our own lived experience tells us about past and contemporary interpretations of these venerated ancient texts.

Living with diversity

- * gender stereotypes an issue of wider cultural interest
- * also controversial topic within the churches
- * at other times other issues have also been very divisive and continue to be so in some cases, including:
 - ◆ shared meals: Jews and Gentiles
 - ◆ male genital mutilation (circumcision)
 - ◆ opposition to military service and empire
 - ◆ non-traditional music in worship
 - ◆ icons and images of various kinds
 - ◆ and (as we have seen) slavery

Biblical and wider theological grounds for same-sex marriage

Limits of biblicism

- * What kind of authority does the Bible actually have?
- * ... and how is it exercised?
- * Prescriptive or descriptive, literal or metaphorical?
- * What extra-biblical considerations drive our use of the Bible to settle theological debates?
- * Why are some biblical statements prescriptive but others are set aside as 'cultural' or 'ritual' texts? (Tattoo anyone)
- * Surely 'culture' presupposes and reinforces doctrine

Marginal faith issues

- * Issues related to marriage, gender and sexuality rarely feature in the Gospels.
- * When they do there is a clear freedom to modify the OT biblical tradition.
- * Jesus opposes divorce, he chooses not to marry or have children, and he welcomes women with unconventional sexual histories.
- * Likewise, the authentic letters of Paul challenge gender stereotypes, encourage celibacy and discourage traditional marriage commitments.
- * In the Deutero-Pauline letters and the Pastoral Epistles we see the 'Pauline school' adopting a more traditional view of marriage and other domestic relationships as Christianity becomes more conservative.
- * **Except for transgressing traditional purity codes as a sign of the kingdom of God among us, such matters are peripheral issues and not central to the Gospel.**

Marriage in the Bible

- * Biblical views of marriage and intimate relationships are diverse
- * contradict numerous mainstream Christian views
- * Bible inscribes and reinforces particular ancient cultural practices relating to food and sex.
- * These include male domination, female subjugation, polygamy, levirate marriage, ethnic taboos, concubinage, rape, and sexual exploitation of vulnerable persons.
- * These cultural views are integral elements of a social system that also included capital punishment, slavery, and ethnic cleansing but are no longer widely accepted by Christians.

Creation theology

- * Creation theology affirms gender diversity as a good and wholesome feature of creation, and not as aberrant, deviant or sinful.
- * Original Earthling ('adam / 'adamah) was non-gendered
- * God saw all s/he had made and it was 'good'
- * The diversity of God's good creation includes a range of human sexual orientations

Bias to the poor

- * in Scripture, God especially cares about the 'poor'
- * not a question of wealth
- * refers to our access to the common weal
- * the poor and marginalised are victims of the powerful and privileged classes
- * LGBTI are among the poor and marginalised in our society and in our churches.
- * sadly they are not the only victims

WWJD

- * Actually we know a fair bit about what Jesus would do
- * Jesus **deliberately violated sacred Jewish (even biblical) rules concerning purity and social intimacy** at meals.
- * There is a total absence of any reference to marriage issues in his teaching, other than his extremely strict views on divorce and remarriage (which many Christian communities choose to set aside)
- * Recall the **Samaritan woman** at the well

Sensus fidelium

- * *Sensus fidelium* evolves over time
- * The mind of the faithful is moving to a more generous and affirming attitude towards LGBTI persons and their intimate relationships.
- * The high vote in favour of changes to marriage law in Australia during the postal ballot of 2017 demonstrates that most Christians—and specifically most members of those churches affiliated with the National Council of Churches in Australia—are in favour of same-sex marriage.
- * Explicit opposition to the full inclusion of LGBTI persons in the life of the church, including solemnising their marriages, is increasingly limited to fundamentalist and ultra-conservative faith communities as part of the so-called 'culture wars' in western society

Using Scripture well

- * use Scripture in ways that respect
- * nature of the documents
- * history of their composition and reception, and
- * lived experience of people of faith over millennia
- * not deploy Scripture as a tool of exclusion & oppression
- * no longer manacles on humanity
- * Bible as a charter for human flourishing.

Time for a chat ...