Message from Rowan Williams, archbishop of Canterbury

? Rowan Williams, archbishop of Canterbury

Bose, 7-10 September 2011
XIX International Ecumenical Conference
on Orthodox spirituality
It's often been observed that the liturgy of the reformed Church of England laid exceptional stress on the daily office

---

XIX International Ecumenical Conference

on Orthodox spirituality

The Word of God in Anglican Tradition

In the time available today, I can't begin to offer a comprehensive survey of what Anglicans have thought about hearing and meditating on God's word across the centuries; that would need a book at least. But what I'll try to do is to introduce you to a few of the great doctors of the Anglican tradition and to the thoughts they have about what is most important in the discussions of this meeting, the transforming grace that comes in the reading of Scripture.

It's often been observed that the liturgy of the reformed Church of England laid exceptional stress on the daily office. The orders for Morning and Evening Prayer in the English Prayer Books, from 1549 onwards, represented a careful weaving together of elements from the sevenfold monastic office – psalms, canticles, responses and passages from Scripture – into two coherent units which guaranteed that the Psalms would all be said in the course of a month and that substantial portions of the Bible would be read each day in a manner which ensured that most of the text of Scripture would be covered in some sort of order. In other words, from the start, the Church of England took it for granted that the encounter with the 'Word of God written' was one that took place within the daily sacrifice of praise offered by the community. Archbishop Cranmer, defending the English Prayer Book, wrote in 1549 that 'in the English service appointed to be read there is nothing else but the eternal Word of God'. And the point of reading Scripture in this context was to provoke the self-awareness that led to repentance and made us fit to receive the sacrament (Folger: Richard Hooker, 195). Put another way, the purpose of reading Scripture was that we should receive God's wisdom: Scripture is not a book that gives us simply information, it introduces us into the mind of the maker. To the extent that it is a witness to and an effective communication of the eternal word who is Christ, the Wisdom of God (I Cor.I.24), it seeks to bring us into harmony with wisdom. The greatest Anglican theologian of the immediate post-Reformation period, Richard Hooker, takes up the phrase from II. Tim. 3.15 about scripture making us 'wise unto salvation' and sets it alongside the end of John 20, 'These things are written that ye might believe that Jesus is Christ the Son of God' (Laws I.14.4): Scripture puts before us the way to life and the laws by which we may find ourselves in harmony with God. 'The principal intent of Scripture is to deliver the laws of duties supernatural' (ibid. 14.1). And Hooker emphasises this dimension of wisdom and 'supernatural' law, so as to avoid the narrow perspective of his opponents who are claiming that Scripture is essentially a law-book that will solve all practical issues of discipline and practice in the Church today. Against this, Hooker argues very strongly that Scripture contains 'everything necessary to salvation' in the sense that it provides what we need to know and could not otherwise find out – not that it is an encyclopaedia of all that could possibly be truly said about God (ibid.).

Hooker has a very high doctrine indeed of the effect simply of reading the Bible in the liturgy. Once again responding to opponents, who have criticised him and others for not giving enough emphasis to preaching, he insists that only the Bible is to be called God's Word and only the Bible communicates life (V.21.3). The text in itself impresses on us what is needed for eternal life, even before any preacher has opened his mouth; indeed just reading Scripture was called 'preaching' in the early Church, says Hooker (ibid.4). 'We need for knowledge but to read and live' (ibid.15): we must not imagine that God's grace, convicting us of sin and opening to us the way of life, has to wait until some human voice has explained how it works. Of course preaching is a gift and charism in the Church, not least because no human intellect can 'sound the bottom of that which may be concluded out of the Scripture' (I.14.2). But we should not confuse the way

in which the Bible makes clear the way to life with what we can deduce from it.

It is not that Hooker has some kind of superstitious belief that the words of the Bible answer our questions without any human intermediary. His point is that we have to be careful not to give too much power to the individual interpreter, since the Word of God has to be accessible to all. But that accessibility is something that happens as the Bible is read in community. What he has in mind is neither what he thinks of as the tyranny of individual preachers with enormous axes to grind nor the chaos of lots of individual readers coming up with their own ideas about the Bible: it is a situation where the Bible is the common 'space' where Christians meet, the language they share as they hear the narratives and poems and laws recited to them as a group. It is the Bible as delivered in common worship like that of the English Prayer Book that will change lives. The reading of Scripture in this context will help us see its meanings and internal connections, will help us interpret it as a Church, and so will lead us to a shared repentance and renewal – a conversion to each other as well as to God, so that the community of faith is built up.

Hooker looks for a balance between the extreme Protestant position of his times, in which every problem is solved by the Bible and anything not commanded in the Bible is forbidden, and in which also the authority of the properly educated preacher to tell you what is important becomes enormous, and the mediaeval position in which there is no special grace attached to Scripture alone, but it is always presented wrapped up, so to speak, in human memory and custom. He wants it to stand out in its uniqueness – but to stand out where it belongs, in the life of an actual worshipping congregation who are at the same time as hearing it also singing psalms and making their prayers. Beware, he says, of separating Bible-reading from all this, as do some of the European churches admired by his opponents: 'the reading of Scripture in the church is a part of our church liturgy, a special portion of the service we do to God' (V.19.5). Reading the Bible is, we might say on this basis, an aspect of our self-offering to God in prayer: we come to hear the Bible read so that we may be open to God's call to repentance and his promise of eternal life.

One of the images Hooker uses for Scripture is that it offers 'many histories to serve as looking-glasses to behold the mercy, the truth, the righteousness of God towards all that faithfully serve, obey and honour him' (I.14.3). And that same image appears again in another of the great writers of classical Anglican devotion a generation later, George Herbert, in the first of his two sonnets on 'The Holy Scriptures'. 'Ladies, look here; this is the thankful glasse, / That mends the lookers eyes: this is the well / That washes what it shows.' Rather mischievously, he pretends to be appealing to female vanity: if any woman wants a mirror in which she will be able to see herself as more attractive, this is what the Bible offers. We look into the Bible and see what our renewed selves might be; or, we see our reflection in the water at the bottom of the well and discover that this water will also wash away our blemishes.

And in the second of the sonnets, he spells out a little how this works. Scripture here is like a starry sky; and we have to try and discern the shape of the constellations, 'Seeing not only how each verse doth shine / But all the constellations of the storie'. We see that one bit of Scripture seems to point to another, then another which completes a message, a sense of new possibility for the believer: 'These three make up some Christians destinie', just as, varying the metaphor, different herbs make up a healing medicine. We come to recognize ourselves in the Bible: our lives become the proof and illustration of what is in the text, and in this process our picture of who we are is revolutionized. 'Such are thy secrets, which my life makes good, / And comments on thee; for in ev'ry thing / Thy words do finde me out, & parallels bring, / And in another make me understood.' We discover who we really are in the 'otherness' of the biblical story, and in that encounter we become a living commentary on the text. As I discover the meaning of who I am in engaging with the Bible, the meaning of the text itself is shown to others.

It is a further development of Cranmer's picture of a scripturally based liturgy in which we are drawn to repentance – to self-knowledge and renewal – leading ultimately to a better and more honest receiving of the sacrament of Communion.
The relation between Scripture, repentance and sacrament is taken up also by the other great Anglican poet of the early seventeenth century, John Donne, in an Easter sermon of 1628 (Booty 1990, pp.143-4), where he draws an unusual distinction between how the Holy Spirit works when we read the Bible privately in the family and when we hear it in church: at home, the Spirit is a 'remembrancer', bringing to mind what we have learned in other contexts, while 'Here in the Church he is with thee as a Doctor to teach thee.' It is in the context of the corporate worshipping life that we learn what the Spirit is actually saying – not because the Church is more important than the Scriptures but because it is of more authority than the individual. And having learned the substance of what Scripture teaches, we must have this evidence of God's purpose 'sealed', ratified in the sacraments, which are the contemporary embodiment of what Scripture is talking about, and 'delivered' through preaching, made applicable to this moment in our lives: 'sealed and delivered to thee in the presence of competent witnesses, the congregation'. Thus the community has a pivotal position in the reception of the Bible: the shape of the liturgy – to coin a phrase – determines what counts as Scripture and what the unified and coherent sense of Scripture is, making individual stars appear as constellations, in Herbert's wonderful metaphor; it is this that forms the subject of meditation and discussion in a private context (but still, crucially, a corporate one, of course, on a smaller scale); and the pattern of Christlike, renewed life that is opened up in all this is affirmed and secured by preaching and sacrament in the congregational assembly once again. The common life of the worshipping community is what gives an intelligible shape to the biblical revelation, making the connections that show it to be one revelation; and so it becomes possible to see how it can be a coherent source of understanding and self-knowledge for a unified life, a life, in Hooker's terms, embodying something of divine Wisdom. Donne and Herbert alike echo one of the

themes flagged a couple of decades earlier by Bishop Lancelot Andrewes, one of those most closely involved with the planning and execution of the new translation of Scripture in 1611: in a Pentecost sermon of 1606, one of two significant sermons on the cloven tongues of Pentecost, he speaks of the Spirit as habitually present in the whole of the Church and thus bringing about a unity in multiplicity that can make the diverse tongues of human speakers – within Scripture and among the readers of Scripture – pronounce truth univoce, with one voice. The Spirit is understood in all these contexts very plainly as that which connects the elements of scripture as it also connects the readers and makes possible a 'connected' life of discipleship.

The writers we have been listening cannot just be read as elements in a single theological synthesis; but it is possible to trace in these passages a number of convergent themes which add up to an impressively consistent theology of scriptural reading. The last point, from Andrewes, about the Spirit's presence and work in the whole Church over time, a presence deliberately contrasted with occasional and passing visitations of inspired wisdom in individuals, is a key here. If we understand scriptural reading as always something done in the context of the Church as a whole, not first and foremost a private or individual exercise, we understand it as an activity in which the Spirit in and through the entire Body of Christ opens the eyes of the individual to who he or she is in the purposes of God. We cannot properly read the Bible first as 'individuals' because we shall not know who or what we are as unique persons if we do not read in communion, read together, so that the great shared defining lines of Christian teaching shape how we see ourselves and each other. In this way, Scripture becomes the mirror that Herbert describes, showing us not what we are as isolated subjects but what we may be in the Spirit and the Body of Christ.

And this is effected by the way in which Scripture as read in the liturgy always connects passage with passage. We are not left without guidance, wrestling with a text on its own and on our own. What is read points to another scriptural moment; Old and New Testaments are set alongside each other, or gospel and epistle in the Eucharistic lectionary; seasonal emphases draw out further meanings. The way in which scriptural reading is structured in the public liturgy is already an interpretation of Scripture, so that – despite the carping of Hooker's Puritan critics – we are never talking about a bare and unreflective reading. Preaching is a vital exercise in the Church, but we should not draw the false conclusion that Scripture without preaching is dumb or meaningless, because its reading is always embedded in a pattern of significant connection. What is more, this pattern of significant connection is a pattern that includes us and our own immediate identity and experience through its tangible embodiment in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, as Donne says, confirming what we hear by means of a physical act of sharing. If the point of Scripture is, as Hooker claims, that we may have wisdom, the wisdom that comes from believing in Christ and so having life in his name, then the understanding we are offered in the liturgy of the connections of Scriptural revelation becomes, concretely and specifically, life in Christ's name as we are fed with the spiritual food of Christ's Body and Blood.

The assumption is that the reading of Scripture in and by the Church gathered for worship is supposed to be the beginning of a journey of transformation; a discipline of scriptural reading that does not focus on this will leave us with a seriously impoverished view of the Bible. Hooker argues that the Puritan theology he is attacking ends up subordinating the Word of God to human words in the end because it insists upon the need for a reading that is controlled, not by the common life of the Church at worship but by an educated clerical elite, without whose expertise the transforming power of the Bible is absent. The way in which our theologians approach Scripture in the liturgy might well be seen as just an articulation of what the entire tradition of using the Bible in church had assumed across the preceding centuries. But the controversial context of the Reformation means that it is rather more original than this alone would suggest. Given the desire of the Reformers, English as much as others, to witness as clearly as possible to the absolute sovereignty of the Bible in the Church, it is vital that liturgy itself should be woven around the theological reading of the Word – and, as Cranmer implies, woven out of the materials of the written Word; all else is distracting, at best decorative at worst misleading. There is a real passion to make sure that nothing but the scriptural text shapes and decides what the common language of Christians worshipping and thinking should be, and all historical traditions are re-evaluated in this light. Yet there is an equal insistence that the act of common worship should be both a celebration of the whole meaning of Scripture and a gateway to new life through the retelling and re-hearing of the scriptural narrative. The primacy of the Bible is not to be imagined as something that reduces the worshipping community to a lecture audience, or as somehow competing with the sacramental activity that makes the Church what it is. There is in all this a genuinely fresh attempt to understand that the Word of God is indeed a Word of transfiguring power, without supposing that it is a Word that can be heard and responded to as a text for mental exercise or legal argument.

Such a tradition has survived in the Anglican world up to more recent times; and I cannot do better than conclude by turning to the greatest Anglican intellect of the last century, the philosopher and theologian Austin Farrer. 'Why do I read the Old Testament? Because it is the spiritual inheritance Christ received, it is what he filled his mind with,…it is the body of doctrine which he took over and transformed. So whenever I am reading the Old Testament, I am asking, "What does this mean when it is transformed in Christ?" and whenever I am reading the New Testament I am asking, "How does this set forth Christ to us?"'(LRW 661). Connections: we read and hear with questions in our minds about connections, how this passage may be seen transfigured in the light of Christ, how this passage promises our own transfiguration in Christ. But in all this work, it is the Spirit of communion who is making the connections – within the text, between text and hearer, between hearer and Word, between one hearer and another. And in the divine making of such

connections lies the hope of abiding justice and wisdom, the righteousness and wisdom of the eternal Word.

? Rowan Williams
Archbishop of Canterbury

XIX International Ecumenical Conference
on Orthodox spirituality