

6/4/14

Can the Bible be Trusted?

Readings:

Luke 1.1-4 & Acts 1.1-5

John 20.24-31 & 21.20-25

Can the bible be trusted?

As we consider this today we will mainly look at the NT and the records of Jesus' life

I remember having a conversation with a dear Christian lady in a previous parish.

She was a sweet person, a tender soul. She read her bible daily, attended home group and went to church every Sunday.

Out of the blue, she asked me to visit her because she wanted to talk to me about a book she had been reading. It was by Bishop John Spong. In this book he cast doubt on the reliability of the Bible stories about Jesus.

He claimed that the bible didn't accurately record what happened in Jesus' life and that it can't really be trusted. Sadly, she lost her faith, and lost her way. She became convinced by these arguments and writings. She stopped coming to church.

I was upset by this, troubled to think that such a dear soul should have her faith undermined.

The truth is that casting doubts on things past is relatively easy.

Despite overwhelming evidence there are those who say that the holocaust never happened. They deny it and raise doubts about it.

We live in a sceptical age where conspiracy theories abound.

Did men ever really walk on the moon?

Did flight MH370 have a catastrophic accident or is there a government cover up hiding the truth from the world.

Are world Governments covering up the reality of alien abductions?

In light of conspiracy theories and sceptics we should not be surprised when we read books or see TV programmes raising doubts about the biblical account of Jesus.

Each of us will have had our own experience either of being sceptical about the bible ourselves or speaking with family and friends who have doubts about the bible.

You may have been sceptical about the truth of the bible. Perhaps before you came to faith the stories of the bible seemed like ancient myths that couldn't be true.

Others may have had discussions with sceptical friends or workmates who raised their points of view, questions or doubts about the bible. Some of these people may have experienced difficulties in life and have personal doubts about God which affect how they see the bible. Some may have an axe to grind and can become quite heated, even confrontational about this. Maybe you have read a book or seen a TV programme which has had you questioning your own faith.

The trustworthiness of the bible and questions of its reliability go to the heart of the Christian faith.

None of us walked with Jesus or heard him speak.

None of us sat and listened to him give the Sermon on the Mount.

None of us ate the fish and bread he miraculously provided for the 5000.

For the truth of these events we rely on the bible.

It is our record of what Jesus said and did. It reveals to us the effect Jesus' life and death had on people and how the church grew.

As Christians we look to the bible with the hope that it contains what Jesus actually said, was accurately recorded by people who heard it,

and then transmitted overtime through various forms of writing and translation until it reaches us.

I have sometimes been a little dismayed when I hear a Christian approach this subject and simply respond, *God said it, I believe it and that is good enough for me.* End of argument – no discussion allowed.

While I appreciate their faith, a faith which I share, the reality of the world around us is while *God said it* may be good enough for me, it is not good enough for others.

Until people find faith, they need good reasons/evidence to point them in the right direction.

We should be able to affirm our faith, plus give reasons for it. We recall the words of Peter, a close friend of Jesus, who said, *Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, 1 Pe 3:15*

What reasonable evidence can we give people who ask about our faith?

Behind the question, Can the Bible be trusted, lie at least three related questions:

- 1) Did Jesus really say those things attributed to him?
 - 2) Did the writers of the Gospel record them accurately?
 - 3) Did those who made later copies faithfully reproduce the writing over hundreds of years?
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1) Did Jesus really say those things attributed to him?

As you read and more deeply study the gospels you find that **Jesus has a unique voice.**

Even when you first read the bible you can't help but notice Jesus speaks in ways which are different from others. There are

his extraordinary claims, the authority with which he speaks and the wisdom of his teaching.

When you have been reading the bible for years you will find his tone, his attitudes and teaching set him apart from others.

Jesus does not sound like his contemporaries.

Neither does he easily fit into any of the social categories of the time, in fact he is very different from them.

He uses distinctive phrases

Jesus began many of his statements saying *truly I say to you*

This is a pattern of speech that is quite different to the way others in his day spoke. John's gospel records it, truly, truly. Those who remember reading this in older translations will recognise the phrase as verily, verily.

In Hebrew he is saying Amen, Amen.

It is his way of stressing the truth claims he was making truth multiplied by truth.

His teaching is different from either the Pharisees or the Sadducees

The Pharisees were highly respected and popular among the people. They were very focused on the correct interpretation of the Torah. The Sadducees were the priestly elite who took care of the temple and were guardians of the faith.

Jesus teaching is not echoing either of the main religious groups of his day. We cannot link his teaching with either of these dominant religious groups.

In fact his teaching is so different we find him in conflict with both of these groups.

His voice stands out from the religious leaders of his day.

His teaching is not what his disciples expected; at times it was an affront to them.

Much of Jesus' teaching challenged, confronted and offended people, even those closest to him.

While the crowds were initially drawn to him, they quickly desert him.

Similarly even many his own disciples left him. Jn 6.66

The fact that Jesus' words were so different from what even his disciples expected reveals that these are his own words rather than words the disciples later put in his mouth.

He spoke with authority.

... the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

Mt 7:28

Jesus had a presence that commanded attention. People were impressed by him. His teaching riveted people.

The things he said and did drew a crowd.

When he spoke it carried the weight of authority.

Looking at this we see Jesus had his own way of speaking and made unique claims, he was different from the religious leaders, the crowd and even his own disciples.

As you read the gospels you find that the words of Jesus have an authentic ring of truth and the weight of authority.

This is the unique voice of Jesus.

2) Did the gospel writers record Jesus' words accurately?

Liberal scholarship in the 18-1900's estimated the NT was written about 230 years after the events. If so much time had passed then there were a number of implications.

If this were true writers couldn't have been eyewitnesses to any of the events they write about and this raises issues about the sources they used to write the gospels.

Typical of this approach was Brian Bruce's documentary *Jesus, the Cold Case* in which he asserts

none of the gospel writers were eyewitnesses,
the gospels contain more fiction than fact
and he states from a modern perspective all we know is
that Jesus died under Pontius Pilate *all the rest is guess work.*

However, we have writings from early Christians dated around 95AD which quote from the gospels, Acts, Romans and several other of Paul's writings.

This shows that these NT books were not only complete at this time, but being widely discussed.

Unlike those of 150 years ago, many of today's liberal scholars put most writings NT between 50-80AD.

This is within the lifetime of eye witnesses.

What motivated the disciples to write about Jesus?

If Jesus was, as the sceptics assert, simply a deluded wannabe messiah, who didn't say anything special or significant, and who was executed with his body thrown on a rubbish tip – why would the disciples write about him?

Why would they not do what earlier followers had done, and simply give up and go home?

Why would they decide to write a fictional account about Jesus that made themselves look bad and would lead to them being persecuted?

It seems to me that the logic of the sceptics is flawed.

If Jesus was a failed messiah there would be no church left to write about him.

Even if there were such followers, then we would need to say that the uneducated people who were fooled by Jesus suddenly became very clever and were able make up some great sayings and teachings that were inspirational and life transforming.

If the later disciples were making this up – why would they make themselves look so bad?

Imagine for a moment that nothing in the gospels is true, it is all fiction.

You then have a group of followers who decided to write about

Peter – to whom Jesus says get behind me Satan and who then goes on to publicly deny Jesus 3 times.

John and James – revealed as egotists who want the best seats in heaven.

Thomas – who doubts the resurrection and wants to stick his fingers in the wounds of Jesus.

Judas – who betrays Jesus and then kills himself.

Women – whose word counted for nothing are portrayed as the witnesses to the empty tomb.

Then having written the fiction they face persecution, lost homes, had to flee, were imprisoned, beaten, were stoned, put to death by the sword.

This simply doesn't make sense.

What would make sense was if something big, unusual, miraculous happened – something like the resurrection, like seeing the risen Christ and talking with him.

Believing that Jesus was the risen/ascended Son of God compelled them to share this message.

Two things added impetuosity to the writings.

Firstly *the church had spread* far and wide and the Apostles couldn't be everywhere to teach everyone, so there was a growing need to write things down.

Secondly the Apostles and other *eye witnesses were getting older* and what they taught needed to be preserved.

Did they have the skills needed to give a reliable account of Jesus?

Oral society – they were trained from youth to remember and pass on stories accurately.

Educated, able to read and write – Jewish boys received a basic education so as to be able to understand the Torah.

They didn't have sceptical parents trying to remove bible teaching from the schools rather the main purpose of school and education was to enable boys to read the scriptures. Some disciples like Matt tax collector would have had a higher education.

In Acts, the religious leaders were astonished by Peter's speech. They had thought of him as uneducated, but because of his

ability to speak and reason using the scriptures they took note that he had been with Jesus.

It is likely that some stories were written down even while Jesus was alive. Mark's Gospel dated 50-60 is the earliest full gospel. Scholars think that there were earlier attempts at this, called proto-gospels. These proto-gospels may have circulated earlier.

The most well known of these is called Q- from the German word Quelle meaning source. Matthew and Luke's gospels have around 200 verses so closely linked, often word for word that may have come from this earlier source.

Rather than the gospels being written 230 years after Christ as some scholars earlier suggested, it is now recognised that they were written much earlier.

Part of our problem with dating these is that the writers weren't concerned about the date they wrote it, but with the story they were telling.

Mark is dated around 50-60 AD

Matt/Luke are reliability dated between 60-70 AD,

John was written around 70 AD.

One of the early church fathers who was born around 60AD wrote of having listened to **John the Apostle**. John himself wrote, *... these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.* John 20.31

Another wrote that **Mark was Peter's interpreter** in Rome and that Mark wrote down the stories of Jesus as told by Peter. Mark is referred to as stubby fingers. In his first letter Peter refers to Mark warmly as his son.

Luke, himself tells us of undertaking his own investigation. Rather than a cold case, Luke does this while the trail is still warm and he wrote, *Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself*

*have **carefully investigated** everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an **orderly account** for you, most excellent Theophilus, **so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*** Lk 1.1-4

With the witness of the early church and of the gospel writers themselves it is reasonable to believe that the books attributed to the writers could have been written by them or written directly under their guidance.

The time frame means that eye witnesses could have verified or denied the events.

The writers couldn't just make it up and rewrite history to serve their own purpose. There were people living who were part of the church and who knew the truth.

3) Suppose Jesus did say these things and the gospel writers were accurate, that still leaves us with the question of the reliability of those who later copied the manuscripts.

The number of manuscripts we have of NT writings is amazing. Compared with other writings from the same period the NT manuscripts are earlier, more complete and with vastly more copies.

Of the NT written 40AD-100AD, the earliest copy/fragment is from 125AD, a gap of just 25-80 years and we have 24,000 manuscripts.

We have NT manuscripts written in languages from all around the Mediterranean, many are in Greek and Latin, while others are Syrian, Coptic, Armenian, and Ethiopic.

Someone with time on their hands has gone through the writings of the early Fathers some dating back to 100AD and has found 86,000 quotations of the NT. This means that even if NT manuscripts did not survive we would be able to piece together all but 20 verses of the NT.

We sometimes wonder if those copying the bible in later years might have added bits in or left bits out.

In fact we know that they did. We know because we have older and more accurate copies to compare with.

The most significant of these is the ending of Mark's gospel.

Mark 16.9-20 isn't in some early manuscripts.

This isn't a big cover up, it is clearly marked so that readers understand that while it is a very early writing, it may not have been there in the original writing. It is quite likely that because Mark ended the gospel so abruptly, that someone helpfully added information about the resurrection and Jesus' commission to the disciples.

When you make a study of this you find for the most part any mistakes in the manuscripts are simply errors in spelling or grammar that doesn't change the meaning of the text.

An interesting example of this comes from the Dead Sea scrolls that were hidden in 68AD and not found until 1947.

One of these was a scroll of Isaiah dated 125BC. When it was compared with a modern scroll 95% of it was the same.

Of the 166 word in Isaiah 53, 17 letters are different. 10 of these are spelling variations; 4 are conjunctions like and/or and the three remaining letters spell the word light, which we have in two existing manuscripts and is known as a variant reading which doesn't change the meaning.

Wherever we can compare manuscripts with earlier ones, we find that they were copied with extreme care. These writings were precious to the people who dedicated their lives to persevering them.

What difference does this make to you or me?

If we invited a good philosopher to come and speak to us, s/he could make you question whether or not you were really here, and to question if any of the objects around you were real.

We live in an age of doubt and scepticism where even recent, well documented events with first hand witnesses like the holocaust are brought into doubt.

How do we decide what is real and true?

One reliable way of identifying truth is the converging of evidence.

There is reliable evidence that Jesus had a unique voice that is recorded in the NT.

Added to this there is evidence that eyewitnesses, the Apostles and others, passed on this information accurately in oral and written forms not long after the events.

We have thousands of full and partial manuscripts very close to the time of original writing.

Further, there is evidence that those who copied these writings did so with extreme accuracy.

All of this converging evidence can give a reasonable person good grounds to accept that the Bible is reliable.

This means that you can have both faith and reason to trust the scriptures. You can know that you are reading the words of Jesus and the events happened as they are described.

However it is one thing to have the words and story of Jesus, it is another thing to accept them and allow them to change your life.

If the bible can be trusted and is reliable - then the unique voice of Jesus

Commands us to repent and believe

Comforts us with news of God's love

Calls us into the family of faith

Challenges us to see the world differently; and to live differently

I invite you to think about this and perhaps over Easter you might read a book that teaches about the reliability of the bible. I recommend can the bible be trusted by Amy Orr-Ewing.

Let us be a church who, recognising the reliability of the bible,

Read it and meditate on its words

Prayerfully seek to obey its truth and apply Jesus' teaching

Consider how we might give helpful answers to those ask us questions about it.

And as we approach Easter, let us hold firmly to
the truth of the bible
the teaching of Jesus
the faith it reveals

Helpful Resources:

Why Trust the Bible? - Amy Orr-Ewing

The Case for Christ - Lee Strobel

The Historical Reliability of the Gospels - Craig Blomberg