

A Question of Authority

Readings: Job chapter 42, verses 1 – 6; John chapter 9, verses 18 – 25

Two weeks ago the lectionary reading from Job left us with his agonising cry; “O that I knew where I might find him”. Today’s reading gives us the answer. “*I had heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear but now my eye sees Thee*”.

What happened in between the two readings? The answer is that God had spoken to Job out of a whirlwind, (Chapter 38) and had confronted him with a whole series of unanswerable questions and forced him to realise human intellect and reasoning was an inadequate tool to solve the ultimate mysteries of life. It is no substitute for a personal relationship and personal experience. “*I had heard of Thee ... but now my eye sees Thee*”.

What is at stake here is the question of authority. On what basis do we believe? Where does the final authority lie?

Protestants have usually answered “The Bible”. After all is not the Bible the word of God? And so they have ransacked the Bible for texts to answer every conceivable question. They have a mantra: “The Bible says” and whatever the Bible says goes.

The only problem with that is that, if you choose your texts carefully, the Bible can be made to mean anything you want it to mean. You can support polygamy or slavery or burning heretics on the basis of Biblical quotation. I am persuaded that there will be no women in heaven and I can provide Biblical proof. Does not the Book of Revelation say “There was silence in heaven for half an hour”? Simply throwing Bible texts around proves nothing and its not enough to keep on parroting “The Bible says”

Roman Catholics, on the other hand, locate their final authority in the Church. They have a mantra; “The Church says”. – and what the Church says goes. When pressed they narrow it down to what the Pope says when he speaks *ex-cathedra*. Any such pronouncement is infallible and to be accepted without question. But there is a problem with accepting what the Church says as our final authority. The Church is forever changing its mind and that is not surprising. Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would lead us into all truth and so we must expect new light and new insights in every age.

Which brings us to the third locus of authority for many Christians. The direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Quakers speak of the ‘inner light’ and, for many Christians, it is what the Spirit says to them which is the final word. The difficulty is that is a very subjective authority. Too subjective. I remember a Synod in Zimbabwe when we debated a highly contentious issue late on the first day and the Chairman said we should go home and sleep on it and pray about it and decide the next day. It was Item 1 on the Agenda next day and eventually we came to a decision. As the vote was announced one minister rushed in; apologised profusely for being late and said that during his prayer time the Holy Spirit had clearly spoken. Problem was what the Holy Spirit had said to him was a flat contradiction of the vote which had just been taken. The Synod was utterly confused.

So where does that leave us? I offer another yardstick. I believe that our final authority is the Mind of Christ. What would Jesus do in any given circumstance; what would Jesus say to any given issue? And to reach an understanding of the Mind of Christ we need to have a thorough knowledge and understanding of the Bible. We need to take on board what the Church says, especially since over 2000 years the Church has accumulated a vast reservoir of knowledge and experience. We need to be attentive to what the Holy Spirit says as we open ourselves to the guidance of the Spirit in our devotions and in our fellowship together.

If I may take an example. In Zimbabwe a vital place in the life of any village is the communal well dug deep into the ground and water is pulled up by a bucket. A strong rope is essential. And invariably the ropes used did not consist of a single strand; their strength came because three separate strands were woven together. It was that which gave them their strength. And, when it comes to living our Christian life, the Mind of Christ informs our thinking and our acting. But the Mind of Christ is three-stranded. Bible; Church and Holy Spirit together enable us understand and respond as Christians to the challenges thrown at us by the world.

One final point. In the last analysis we are responsible for what we decide and do. We live by faith and that faith must be our own. One sentence has remained with me for over 50 years now. It is this: Faith is personal, not propositional. It is to be found, not in words or statements however true, but in a relationship. Christianity consists of a personal relationship with God in Christ.

So it was for Job. He had heard of God via his friends but what finally convinced him was an encounter with God in a whirlwind. *"I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear but now my eye sees thee"*.

So it was for Paul. At the end of a tumultuous life he wrote to his young protégé Timothy and said I know whom I have believed — (not what I have believed but who I have believed). His was a personal conviction based on a personal relationship.

So it is for us. And that is what God offers us in Christ.