Reading the Bible in context

Bishop Laurie Green's book Let's Do Theology introduced us to the importance of context. His recent book, Urban Ministry and the Kingdom of God (SPCK) takes us further into that exploration. Here he touches on some of the dangers of forgetting context as we read the Bible.

The Bible is a mind-blowing, earth-changing book. But there are many reasons for reading the sacred text and not all of them are respectable – so let's investigate some of the ways we might read the Bible.

First of all, at the simplest level, we can read scripture merely in order to find out what it says, without any interest in its relevance. If I want to know how many sons Jacob had, I can read the story in the book of Genesis and find out. I can become more adventurous however, and read the text in search of its original meaning, and then put that into practice in my own life – Jesus said turn the other cheek, so I must do the same. Another approach is to ask the text for meaning – if I have a philosophical concern about suffering, I can turn to passages which address that issue. But I can go much further, and read the text in order not just to talk about suffering but to learn how to free people from it – a 'liberative' reading.

All these ways of studying the text are legitimate but the Bible can also be read to oppress and hurt others, and the danger is that this can even be done quite unconsciously. Because the Bible is so powerful a text this oppressive way of interpreting scripture can lead to terrible consequences, and we end up preaching our own prejudices as if they were the word of God.

Perhaps the best known example of this was when some white South African Christians preached apartheid from certain Biblical stories. They felt it was self-apparent that they were God's new chosen people, capturing the new African Promised Land. They therefore felt it right to subjugate the Africans, just as before them the Hebrews had terrorised the Canaanites at God's command. Look too at the overt racial and sexist treatment of the non-Jewish women in Nehemiah 13:25-27. Oppressive passages like these are reasonably obvious, but others are more difficult to spot. So what should we do?

One of the key ways to guard against this sinful use of the text is to be alert always to context – both the context of each biblical story, and our own cultural context – for what God's Word may have been to his people in one context may be totally misunderstood by us in another.

St Paul was good at context, so let's see what we can learn from him. First, he spells out for us his own background. He tells us that he comes from a very privileged group, with impeccable Jewish credentials (Philippians 3:4) and of course Roman citizenship (Acts 23:22). The sacred text itself therefore gives us fair warning that some of what Paul writes will be influenced by the prejudices of his upbringing – his context. The Holy Spirit will inspire his writing, but the Spirit will not make him someone he is not – just as the Spirit will not correct the awful Greek of the writer of Mark's Gospel. Although inspired, the text bears the marks of its context. The writer of the letter to Titus (1:12) says that all people from Crete are liars, and Paul quite openly says that he will 'send' Onesimus the slave back to his owner (Philemon v12) as if he had the right to order a slave to do anything, converted Christian or not! But we can more than forgive Paul this slip – for in the context of his own first century culture he is actually being revolutionary and liberational in the

extreme! So there is always something good to be learnt from the text but if we misplant it out of its context we may think it is condoning contemporary slavery, apartheid, anti-semitism, gay-bashing, and all manner of ill. If the Holy Spirit respects context, then so must we.

How then should we read scripture legitimately to guide us in our own so different culture? St Paul helps us again, for much of what he wrote addresses this very question. It's as if the Bible gives us a worked example of how to do it – how to make the transition from scripture to the new context we face – for it tells us how the early Church moved from its Jewish origins into the context of the Gentile world. Circumcision was the outward symbol of the cultural difference between Jew and Gentile and so Paul uses that issue to teach that the norms of the originating Jewish culture, whilst instructive, need not set bounds upon the freedom and liberation we experience in the Spirit. To allow non-circumcised males to belong, let alone take leadership roles in the Church, was on the brink of causing a great split in the Church of Paul's day. The answer he offered was to immerse himself in Gentile culture, acknowledging its plusses and minuses, and experience what God's Spirit was doing there. And here is the key – Paul read the scriptures from within that alien context and from that experience preached a liberating faith which set both Gentile and Jew free to be themselves whilst at the same time honouring the other – certainly a lesson for our times.

Let me finally share a few examples of how this contextual approach can help us today. First – we now know that first century, cross-cultural, people were big grain exporters through the port of Tyre from the agricultural centre of Syria. Mark 7:26 specifies that the cross-cultural Syro-Phoenician woman who met Jesus was "Hellenistic" – an expert in the trade language of the Empire, Koine Greek. So she was related to those sending bread to Rome out of this poor area. Jesus says, "It is not right to take bread from the children's mouths and throw it to the dogs." Now think of all the times Jesus talks about bread and how often we've been told that he only meant something spiritual by it. Just suppose that he was also talking about the staple need of poor people – as in this example? What extra light might that throw on the feeding of the five thousand or even the Holy Eucharist itself?

Another example. We know that during Jesus' early years Nazareth was attracting carpenters and craftsmen because, only one hour's walk away, the town of Sepphoris was being reconstructed. Jesus therefore knew first-hand the plusses and minuses of 'regeneration'. And because Sepphoris and the other newly built city of Tiberias were Herod's way into stronger trade-links with Rome, Jesus also knew something of what we today call 'globalisation'.

So much for understanding the context of the text. But addressing our own context can also help bring the Bible alive in new ways. I was Parish Priest in a small back-street church when I sought to do some Bible study with our Leprosy Knitting Group. The first step, following Paul's example, was to get in alongside and experience the knitting circle for myself – they even got me knitting with them! They explained that there were those who enjoyed the simple spontaneity of knitting, while others preferred the methodical aspects of the craft, following the most intricate knitting patterns. The obvious place in the Bible to reflect upon this two-fold experience of creativity was in the earliest chapters of Genesis, where we found two creation stories, the first very methodical (seven days with clear goals for each day) and a second where God seems to revel in the spontaneity of creation. Also, the Group was interested to see the Bible presenting leprosy as a disease where, as parts of the body drop off, the sufferer drops out of society as a social outcast. Jesus makes the

leper's body whole so as to reintegrate the whole community. It is as if Jesus makes creation whole again. Just one broken stitch and the whole knitted garment unravels – the whole creation comes apart.

This reading of scripture from the context of our own experience led us, like St Paul, to challenge the status quo. Because of old age, some Group members, now housebound, no longer belonged – like the leper, they were lost from the community. The Bible gave us the vision for an evening service where all that we had learnt over the weeks was shared with the congregation, and that evening lots of elderly folks were ferried in to church from their homes for the first time in years. The Bible stories were read, our congregation was changed, lives were renewed, and the healing Spirit of Jesus pointed us to a new inclusive future.

There is no doubt that every reading of scripture is subjective, because we cannot pretend to inhabit someone else's context. But we can know it to be a reading that is inspired by the Holy Spirit if it sits easily in the context and company of the liberating Jesus. In other words, our test must always be – 'is our interpretation of a passage, for the liberation of captives (Luke 4:18) or for their further oppression?' (Luke 11:46)

Reading the Bible must never sweep the crucial question of context under the carpet where it can fester unseen and issue in self-serving prejudice. On the contrary, honesty about the Bible's context and our own offers the Holy Spirit space to breathe a new mercy into our reading of the Bible, for the building up of his people and the liberation of his Church.