



Wed 1 Sep

Naomi Starkey writes...

When we read the Bible, it is always good to do so with an eye on 'the big picture'. Yes, God can speak to us personally through the passage we read; yes, we can find unexpected and powerful insights for our individual lives and lessons to apply in our journey of discipleship, but we should not forget that the Bible is not just about us, here and now. Of course God loves and cares about each one of us, but we are also part of a vast, eternal story that we will only understand when we are finally in his presence.

At the same time, parts of the Bible that may seem of limited application to the 21st century can still be a means of teaching us more about God's purposes for the world. In our continuing series of 'Bible stories rediscovered', Stephen Rand writes on Noah, covering not only the flood and the ark but also the shameful episode that followed. He shows how that narrative can teach us far more than we might assume, given the ark's traditional status as a highlight of children's picture Bibles (as is true for so many of our 'Bible stories rediscovered!').

It's good to be able to welcome Elaine Duncan of the Scottish Bible Society, who has written some readings on the letters to the 'seven churches of Asia' found in the opening chapters of the book of Revelation. While many people find this a difficult part of scripture, Elaine points out in her introduction that it nevertheless 'encourages us to see our lives in the bigger context of God's rule and reign in the world and across the ages'.

For me, however, the highlight of this issue of New Daylight are Rachel Boulding's beautifully written and inspiring readings on 'words of commitment' - God's commitment to us and (as she puts it) 'our more faltering commitment to him'. Over seven days of notes, which she wrote in the breathing space between chemotherapy sessions for cancer, she explores how God's love for his creation is both the foundation and the furthest limit of the 'big picture'. On 27 September, she summarises this in a single pithy sentence: 'Our purpose is love: to be loved, to love and to spread God's love.'

Introduction

Snapshots of Jesus: Luke

I enjoy photography - or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I enjoy taking snapshots because, whatever my 'photography' is, it is certainly not very expert. I could show you many snaps of 'things that got away', from a spectacular puffin that vacated a clump of Scottish grass just before my shutter clicked to a whole school of whales that vanished at the crucial moment in South African waters. Perhaps my most inept attempt was one day when I was walking on a Welsh hillside and heard what sounded like a ton of breakfast cereal snap-crackle-and-popping as if a lake of milk had just been poured over it. On investigation I found that the power of the sun that morning was just right to cause the furze bushes to pop their seedcases en masse, giving rise to this Hallelujah chorus. I took a snapshot of the event, which, in retrospect, was very silly as it didn't amount to much without the audio effects.

The truth is that our photos will always fall way short of the reality. At best they can only remind us of past events and experiences and invite us to go back to them and renew our joy in them. So why would I try to take 'snapshots' of Jesus? Well, I guess for the same reason that I take other snapshots - because I love the subjects so much that I don't want to be without a reminder of them. So it is for this reason that I wander through the events of the Gospels (in this case the Gospel of Luke) with an eye open for what especially attracts my attention. In doing so, I will certainly walk past a thousand other incidents, equally momentous. All I can do is share with you the special moments that have spoken to me in my journey with Luke and invite you to discover what they mean for you. If the reality of our world consistently evades our cameras, how much more will the mystery of God elude our attempts to express it? Even so, our snapshots matter. They are reminders of what has touched our hearts. So, I wish you God's blessing as you browse this little album from Luke. May it take you a little deeper into the heart of the one who is closer to you than you are to yourself.

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Luke 3:10 - 14 (NRSV)

Straight talker

And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?' In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.' Even tax-collectors came to be baptised, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.'

It is sometimes said, 'If you don't think you will like the answer, don't ask the question.' Today everyone plies Jesus with a question: the crowds, the tax-collectors, even the soldiers. The question they ask is simple: 'What should we do?' Jesus' answer is as simple and direct as their question and it carries just the same weight today for us: do the right thing by your fellow human beings. Share what you have with those in need. Be just in your dealings with each other. Don't use force to threaten people, even the subtle force of dishonest suggestion or emotional pressure. Be content in your own hearts.

I wonder if the questioners liked what they heard. Quite possibly they nodded approvingly and then went on living the way they had always lived. The implications of Jesus' straight talking are much more far-reaching, much more disturbingly uncomfortable, than most of us really want to contemplate. Perhaps they went away wishing they had never asked!

What about ourselves? We might well include this same question in our prayers: what then should I do? Do we want to hear Jesus' answer? Are we willing to hear what he is suggesting in our hearts, above the noise of what we ourselves want to do? The two may not always be the same. When we look honestly at the particular situations in our own lives, and in the life of our world right now, what straight answers might Jesus be wanting to give us?

Reflection

Ask an honest question and Jesus will give you a straight answer. Dare you, dare we, pose the question, 'What then should we do?'

Margaret Silf

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