

How Jesus used the Bible (Matthew 22:23-40)

I really thought that John and Daniel were going to become Christians. I had talked to them about it for months. But in the end, as far as I know, neither of them did make the decisive step towards faith in Christ that I had been hoping and praying for.

They were both Cambridge students, but they didn't know one another – in fact, their time there was separated by more than ten years – John in the 1980's and Daniel in the late nineties. But my conversations with each of them returned to my memory as I thought about this passage that we are going to study this evening. For though the obstacles to faith which they encountered were very different in nature, they had one thing in common. Both these young men were turned away from the Christian faith, not by the arguments of atheists or the rival claims of other religions. Ironically, and for me most painfully, they were both disillusioned by what they were told about the Bible by other Christians.

In John's case, it was a book that caused the trouble. I can remember him now removing it from his jacket pocket to show me. I recognised it immediately; it was at that time rather notorious, a slim paperback authored by an Anglican bishop. 'This guy doesn't believe what you say you believe, Roy.' John complained. 'He doesn't believe in Jesus' divinity; he doesn't believe he rose from the dead; he doesn't believe he is unique; he doesn't believe the meaning of his death on the cross is anything like the meaning you ascribe to it; he doesn't believe the Bible – at least not much of it. If he was an atheist or a Muslim, I could cope with all these doubts he expresses – but look at the back of his book! He's a Right Reverend – he wears a dog-collar – he has degrees in theology! How many degrees in theology have you got, Roy? He must know what he's talking about. How can I feel sure about Jesus and the Bible when you Christians can't make up your mind what you believe?'

My spirits sank very low that day, I recall. I could only sympathise really. I had myself flicked through the book to which he referred, and it had exasperated me as much as it had bewildered John.

It was as I say more than a decade later that I encountered Daniel. His doubts proved just as intractable but came from a quite different source, for unlike John, Daniel was from a conservative Christian family. His father held office in a prominent evangelical free church. Living for the first time away from home, Daniel was having to decide whether he wanted to commit himself to the faith of his parents or not. And there was a problem – nothing to do with the opinions of sceptical bishops this time – no, Daniel was gay. He hadn't told anyone at home, but he knew what they would say. As far as his father and the minister of his home church were concerned, the Bible said homosexuality was a sin. To become a Christian, he would have to 'repent' of it – and Daniel didn't think he could. Once again, I sympathised – far more deeply and personally than at that time I could possibly share with him – for, by that time in the 1990's, I had accepted that I too was gay, though it had taken me a lot longer to realise the fact than it had taken Daniel.

I tried my best to assure him that, like many other ethical issues, the debate about homosexuality was an area where Christians could legitimately have different opinions and should not be an insuperable barrier to faith in Christ. 'But what about the Bible?' Daniel replied. 'What about Leviticus 20 and Romans 1? My pastor insists these texts mean it's impossible to be a Christian and gay. And everyone at my church seems to agree with him!'

A sad tale then. Two Cambridge students who each came close to personal faith in Jesus – today they must be middle-aged men and, as far as I know, they are unbelievers still.

I want to suggest to you this evening that the root of their problem was in fact the same. It lay in the way those in authority in the church used the Bible. In the one case, it was a liberal bishop; in the other, an evangelical pastor – two very different extremes of churchmanship. But in both cases the way they used the Bible had a disastrously undermining effect on the embryonic faith of these young men.

And again, I want to suggest to you this evening that, dismayed as we may be by this, we should not be surprised by it – for even in Jesus' own day, liberal and conservative wings of the institutional Jewish church were deploying the combined force of their biblical scholarship to similar effect – the only difference was that, in their case, the damage inflicted on the plausibility of Jesus' claims was quite deliberate.

In the section of his gospel that we are studying, Matthew recounts two interrogations that make that hostile purpose very plain: **the first - interrogation by the Sadducees (verses 23-33)** and **the second - by the Pharisees (verses 34-40)**.

I want to ask a general question of these two sections this evening: **'How did Jesus use the Bible?'**

I believe we shall discover two key answers to that question:

- 1. Jesus treated the Bible with the greatest respect – even though his enemies tried to use the Bible against him, he nevertheless fully endorsed its authority and divine inspiration**
- 2. Jesus brought startling new insights into how the Bible should be understood – his response to those who used the Bible against him was not to deny its authority but to interpret it differently**

We'll begin with the interrogation by the Sadducees:

Matthew 22:23-28

That same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus with a question. "Teacher," they said, "Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and have children for him. Now there were seven brothers among us. The first one married and died, and since he had no children, he left his wife to his brother. The same thing happened to the second and third brother, right on down to the seventh. Finally, the woman died. Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?"

Without wishing to press the analogy too far, I think it's fair to say that the Sadducees had quite a lot in common with that Anglican bishop whose book troubled John. They were a wealthy elite based in and around the Jerusalem temple, where many of them were ordained priests. Like that Anglican bishop then, they were closely associated both with the political establishment and the sacramental ritual of the state church. Like him, they were also highly selective about the bits of the Bible they were prepared to believe. They accepted only the first five books of Moses as inspired scripture, regarding the remainder of what we call the Old Testament as at best apocryphal, and completely rejecting the rabbinical commentary on the Old Testament, which I will say more about in a moment. We can perhaps sum them up as politically conservative but theologically liberal.

One consequence of their very limited view of the Bible was that, as Matthew highlights in v 22, they did not believe in a future resurrection of the dead. As far as they were concerned, no such doctrine was to be found in the books of Moses – it was just a fanciful speculation on the part of the later prophets and the rabbis. And it is this scepticism that forms the basis of the rather bizarre question they put to Jesus; allow me to just give you bare bones of it.

The book of Deuteronomy laid down that if a married man died without issue, his brother had a duty to marry his widow and produce an heir to the family estate. Scholars call this the law of *levirate marriage*. You may rightly consider that it was a rather odd rule but, in fact, in a primitive tribal society, where marriages were normally arranged affairs anyway and inheritance disputes could be very unpleasant, it probably reflected practical wisdom – it was all about keeping property in the family. Anyway, this ancient law of levirate marriage is not really that important here – the issue in debate is not the law of inheritance but that controversial doctrine of resurrection that the Sadducees had doubts about.

Seven brothers had all been married to the same woman, they said – it was quite clearly a hypothetical situation – what philosophers call *a reductio ad absurdum* – an artificially constructed case study designed to show the ridiculousness of the premise on which it is based.

‘At the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?’

Well Jesus, you observe, is not in the least fazed by their tendentious enquiry and turns his guns in reply on their mistake but the fundamental ignorance that informed it.

Matthew 22:29-32

Jesus replied, “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. But about the resurrection of the dead – have you not read what God said to you, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.”

‘You are in error because you do not know the scriptures or the power of God.’

The Sadducees then were victim not to just one but to two sources of ignorance – the scriptures and the divine omnipotence.

Jesus deals with the second of these first:

First, he says, you are underestimating the power of God because you assume the resurrection state would have to be identical to this life. Jesus insists that it in fact it is different in at least one major respect. Marital relationships and sexual intercourse will have no place in the world to come.

This revelation must have come as a bit of a thunderbolt to these Jewish men. Indeed, it may come as a bit of shock to you too! I have certainly met people today who profess to find Jesus’ words here most unwelcome. Sex is such an important part of most of our lives, how could doing without such physical intimacy possibly be ‘heaven’?

C S Lewis’ comments in his book *Miracles* may be some help on that score. He suggests that the disappointment people express about this verse is misplaced. The point about heaven is that, freed from its linkage to sexual reproduction, the unconditional commitment of human love will become a universal experience there. In this present world, our deepest experience of love can only be expressed through a

pair-bond - otherwise it becomes diluted or marred by jealousy – but in heaven self-giving love will become characteristic of all relationships. Heaven will be a world of love – for as John famously tells us ‘God is love’. The corollary of this is that monogamy will become irrelevant; in heaven our capacity for interpersonal love will no longer be limited and constrained but infinitely widened and intensified. Well, you may want to discuss that prospect more later!

Suffice it to say here that the Sadducees, by their scornful caricature of the resurrection state, were making a problem where none existed. You grossly underestimate the power of God, says Jesus. When he raises the dead, he does not merely restore them to this life; he creates in them and around them a whole new and much more wonderful kind of existence, where pathetic questions like yours simply do not arise.

It is perhaps worth side-tracking for a moment to observe that these verses may well have some relevance to the debate about homosexuality too. Whatever line you take on the interpretation of those notorious ‘clobber’ passages in Leviticus and Romans 1, it is arguable from what Jesus says here that the anti-gay lobby in the church are simply far too obsessed with the physical aspects of sex. It seems likely that in heaven the division between gay and straight will, like heterosexual marriage, also be no more. Indeed, it’s conceivable that Jesus is implying the resurrection body will be androgynous – ‘like the angels’ he says! Well, are angels male or female? Again, you may want to talk about that later!

What is, of course, indisputable is that this was radically new information that Jesus was providing, new information that enabled him to interpret the Bible in ways that were in many respects novel.

And he continues with that radicle reinterpretation as he analyses the Sadducees’ error further:

‘You are in error (not only because you are ignorant of what the power of God can achieve in the world to come, but also) because you do not know the scriptures ...

‘Have you not read what God said to you: I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. He is not the God of the dead but of the living.’

Note first of all the assumption Jesus makes, almost in passing, about the abiding relevance of the Bible. ‘God said’ these words – so we are indeed dealing with the inspired Word of God when we read Scripture – and more than that, God spoke these words not just to Moses but ‘to you’. It is a living Word through which, in its written form, he continues to communicate today.

That inspired divine Word, says Jesus, is not as silent on the issue of the life beyond the grave as you Sadducees maintain. To support this assertion, he cites a biblical text. Significantly, it comes from the book of Exodus (chapter 3) – aware that the Bible that the Sadducees accepted was truncated, he shrewdly quotes a text that they couldn’t argue with – the encounter between Moses and God at the burning bush. Notice the remarkable way he interprets this famous text:

For starters, he points out to them the prominence of the present tense of the verb ‘to be’:

I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – he is not the God of the dead then but of the living.’

Part of Jesus’ argument then is that that present tense ‘I am’ implies that these three patriarchs were (and are) still alive to God, though of course, in the time of Moses, they had been in the grave for centuries.

Now if I am to be honest with you, I have to admit that some scholars regard Jesus' exegesis here as rather precarious – you may feel that he is pinning too much on a single word too - but at the very least, it does indicate that Jesus took the Bible very seriously – like many a conservative Bible scholar today, he was prepared to argue a theological point on the strength of the tense of a verb. The inspiration of the Bible for him extended to every word – including grammatical details.

Having said that, my own view is that Jesus argument here relies on more than that. Fully understood, he is making an even deeper point, and one which the shallow Bible study of the Sadducees had conspicuously missed.

One of the things they had in common with the Pharisees, you see was that they treated the Bible as a book of rules to govern human behaviour. But Jesus is indicating here that it is far more than that – it is not fundamentally a book of law, but a book of faith. In the books of Moses, God is revealed primarily as a God who enters covenant relationships with human individuals who trust their lives to him. He is not just the lawgiver of the Jewish nation; he is the personal friend of Abraham, the personal friend of Isaac, the personal friend of Jacob. He is a God who shares their human experience, guiding their steps and making inalienable promises of fidelity to them.

This is my name, he says to Moses – the eternal 'I am' - I am the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob – this how you are to think of me – a personal God who is ever present and enters into unbreakable and unconditional relationships with human beings.

Now, says Jesus, it is quite inconceivable that a God who is committed to such an indestructible quality of personal relationship with human individuals, should allow that relationship to perish in the grave. His covenant vow to be their God had no 'till death us do part' proviso in the small print. The logic of the Abrahamic covenant relationship, he insists, must issue in vindication beyond the grave. How can an omnipotent God allow someone to whom he has unconditionally pledged his protection and blessing to perish? He can't be the God of dead people – he can only be the God of people who by virtue of life are able to respond to him.

According to the gospel narrative, of course, this was not just speculation on Jesus' part; something had quite recently happened in Jesus' life which dramatically confirmed his understanding of the Bible on this point – the transfiguration (recorded in Matthew 17) – an extraordinary experience in which Jesus held a conversation with the glorified forms of Moses and Elijah – key representatives of the OT Law and Prophets. Jesus is not guessing when he says of the OT saints, 'he is the God of the living' – he had personally met a couple of them.

Once again, note that Jesus' response to those who were trying to use the Bible to challenge him was not to question the authority of the Bible but to use it in a remarkably novel way, which was no doubt why the crowds were so amazed:

Matthew 22:33

When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching.

'Astonished', because he did not contradict the ancient text in any way but brought startling new light to it.

If you think there is no resurrection from the dead, then you just haven't reflected on the meaning of your Bible profoundly enough, he tells the Sadducees.

He would say the same to that liberal Anglican bishop that troubled John. Jesus doesn't flatter the Sadducees with compliments about the valuable contribution of their learned opinions to scholarly debate. He says quite candidly and without apology: 'you are in error'. I believe many of our contemporary theologians would stand rebuked by him on the same grounds - they too deny the possibility of miracles, specifically the Easter miracle – and they too deny the authority of the Bible, picking and choosing the bits of it which they are prepared to accept. They are in error for the same two reasons – because they do not know their Bible and they underestimate the power of God.

That brings us to Jesus handling of the Pharisees:

Matthew 22: 34-36

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

Now again, without wishing to read the present into the past in way that ignores the huge difference in historical context, the Pharisees of the first century were about as close as you could get to the conservative evangelicals with which Daniel was so familiar.

Unlike the Sadducees, few if any of them were ordained clerics – on the contrary, they were extremely pious laymen and not greatly interested in the sacramental hocus pocus of the temple. Their sect had grown up, you see, in the period of the exile when access to the temple and its altar was no longer possible. As a result, their great ambition was to preserve the distinctiveness of Jewish culture in the highly secularised environment into which the exile plunged them – and they sought to do this by scrupulous obedience to all those aspects of the OT law which did not require the temple but could be performed at home or in the local synagogue. If the characteristic day job of the Sadducees was to be a priest, many of the Pharisees earned their living as 'scribes' – experts in the Jewish law – they combined the roles of lawyer and Bible scholar.

Now you might have thought this would mean that Jesus would see them as allies – ostensibly they were great champions of the Bible – and not just the 5 books of Moses that the Sadducees accepted – but the whole Old Testament as we know it today. But the problem was, when you examined their teaching carefully, it became apparent that it wasn't actually the Bible that was the controlling influence on their opinions and practices; rather it was the huge corpus of oral commentary on the Bible which had been developed by the rabbis since the exile and handed down by mouth within the post-exilic Jewish community. This Halakhah, as it is technically called by the Jews, is sometimes referred to in the gospels as 'the tradition of the elders'; it was a complex mass of rules and regulations covering what a pious Jew should do in every imaginable situation in life. The purpose of all these rules was, as I say, to maintain the cultural distinctiveness of the Jews – to avoid, what evangelical Christians today often call 'worldliness'. To be holy – 'sanctified' as we would say, you had to obey the rules that made you different from the Babylonians, and the Greeks and the Romans – you had to resist the cultural imperialism of 'the world'. So the Pharisaical scribes devised a rule for every occasion – they even dreamt up imaginary situations in order to work out what you should do in totally hypothetical circumstances. Circumcision was very important to them, as was the meticulous performance of certain ritual washings and the kind of food you ate. There were rules about tithing too, and what you could or

couldn't do on the Sabbath. There were rules about what clothes you should wear, and how you should limit your contact with the opposite sex and with non-Jews. In short, there were rules about absolutely everything, and as a result, the books which the scribes compiled of all this rabbinical commentary on the law were much larger and more formidable than all the books of Moses or even of the entire Old Testament put together.

Technically this approach to ethics is called **casuistry**. What I want you to notice is that Jesus here is cutting a swathe through its complicated legalism – he provides instead a single interpretive key to the OT law - a single informing principle that underlies all biblical ethics.

Matthew 22:36-40

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

It's important not to overstate what Jesus is saying here. He is not replacing the OT law by a generalised ethic of love. Some modern commentators have tried to interpret him that way. One of the most famous was Joseph Fletcher, who in his book *Situation Ethics* back in the 60's suggested that we can dispense with all moral rules altogether and simply allow love to 'home in' like a moral compass on the right course of action in any situation – so he famously concluded that adultery was ok if you 'loved' the person. It's a dangerous way to go, and I don't think it's what Jesus meant at all. If you know the Sermon on the Mount recorded back in the earlier chapters of Matthew, you will remember that Jesus there emphatically refuses to set aside any commandment of the OT law.

‘Do not think I have come to abolish the law – not a jot or tittle will pass from it.’

In fact, as far as adultery is concerned, he enjoins there an ethic which is even stricter than the 7th commandment – ruling that lustful thoughts were just as culpable as sexually immoral actions – and arguing that angry words as well as homicidal deeds were prohibited by the commandment 'thou shalt not kill'

No, Jesus is not replacing the detail of God's law with some vague 'hippie' idealism about love being 'all you need' – what he is doing is expounding the inner coherence of God's law. The moral law of God, he says is not a set of arbitrary rules conjured up by God, like a schoolmaster dreaming up a tricky test for the lower sixth – the law of God is an expression of his own divine character and is marked therefore by an integrating principle – two kinds of relationship are the key to rightly interpreting it – a vertical relationship to God and a horizontal relationship to others – the whole of the Old Testament hinges on getting these two loving relationships right – Moses law is simply an expression of what loving God and loving your neighbour requires in an ancient middle-eastern context.

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this radical approach to interpreting biblical ethics.

For a start, Jesus' interpretive key to the OT law rules out the **casuistic approach of the Pharisees**

As we have said, they generated thousands of cases and decided what should be done in each one of them. Case law of this kind, of course, is the kind of scholarship that has always kept lawyers in business, for it means you and I can never decide what is legal or illegal without their expert advice. It does have

certain advantages when it used responsibly. But all too often history has shown that casuistry produces all kinds of moral distortions. And Jesus was forever pointing these out to his disciples.

For example, it made the Pharisees phenomenally pedantic – they would tithe, not just their income, but the spices and herbs in the kitchen – painstakingly cutting them up so they could give a tenth to God. Someone suffering from obsessive compulsive disorder might get a certain satisfaction from this kind of meticulous rule-keeping, but for the vast majority it was a ludicrous burden.

‘They tie heavy loads on men shoulders.’ Jesus complained (Matthew 23:4).

Sadly, the problem with their casuistry didn’t stop there - it wasn’t just onerous, it was in many respects hypocritical, for the Pharisees often used their expertise in pettifogging rules to evade really important aspects of moral duty.

‘You give a tenth of your spices, but you neglect the really important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.’ (Matthew 23:23-24)

I have added a short section from Mark 7 where Jesus gives a classic example of this. It relates to caring for parents. The fifth commandment enjoins us, as I’m sure you remember, to ‘honour your father and mother’. Just as today, one of the ways this moral duty could affect an adult son or daughter in the first-century was the need to provide financial assistance for their parents when they got old. The Pharisees, however, had created a neat legal loophole that enabled them to evade this filial responsibility. If you put all your money in a special account called ‘Corban’, they said, it became holy cash dedicated to God and cannot then be spent on ordinary expenses, like nursing home fees for instance. Jesus was infuriated by this:

Mark 7: 8, 10-13

‘You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!’ he complained. *‘For Moses said, “Honour your father and mother”, but you say if a man says to his parents, “Whatever help you otherwise might have received from me is Corban”, then you no longer let him do anything for them. Thus, you nullify the word of God by your tradition.’*

Notice that: ‘You nullify the word of God by your tradition.’ Once again, Jesus does not question the authority of the biblical text, but of the Pharisees’ use of casuistry to interpret it in a way that suited them.

‘Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites’, he says again and again in a litany of warnings about this kind of thing in Matthew 23.

On a more general level, Jesus’ words here are the key to interpreting the relevance of specific OT texts for today.

You don’t need me to tell you how much debate has been generated over the centuries by the question ‘how far are we to go in obeying the ancient Jewish law? Take the Sabbath for instance – should we observe it on Saturday or Sunday – should we observe it at all?

Well according to Jesus, the question we must put to every old testament law is ‘how did this ancient requirement strengthen love for God and neighbour?’ – for that is the key to understanding its purpose

– and only when we have rightly understood its original purpose can we begin to decide its application for today?

When you study the Old Testament laws about the Sabbath, for instance, in that light you quickly realise that the fastidious way the Pharisees tried to calculate how many yards it was permissible to travel on a Saturday completely missed the point. The Sabbath was about making time in your diary for spiritual things and giving those who worked for you adequate free time to do the same – loving God and loving your neighbour. As a result, Jesus never hesitated to heal the sick on the Sabbath, in spite of the Pharisees' pedantic objections, insisting that the Sabbath was designed for this humanising purpose.

Again, if we may side-track for a moment, this hermeneutic key is enormously relevant to the interpretation of the Old Testament laws about homosexuality of course. If homosexuality was forbidden by Moses, it must have been because there was something about it in those ancient days which contradicted the twin imperatives of love on which, according to Jesus, every OT text hinged. Perhaps homosexuality was associated with pagan idolatry in the ancient world – contrary to the command to love God – indeed we know that it was. Or perhaps it was associated with the exploitation of the weak by the strong, contrary to love for neighbour – again we know that the rape of male slaves and young boys was common in many pagan societies. The kind of loving same-sex relationships with which we are familiar today no doubt existed in the ancient world, but according to Jesus' interpretive key, it is hard to see how they can have been the intended target of those prohibitions – for all the law and the prophets hang on love – the Bible is designed to promote loving relationships; how then can any law of God be interpreted in such a way as to discourage love?

But perhaps the most fatal aspect of the Pharisees' casuistic obsession with tradition was that it rendered them incapable of adapting to a changing world

Putting rabbinic interpretation on a par with Scripture meant that they could not work out what God demanded of them in their contemporary situation. They were trapped in the past – like theological dinosaurs, it is impossible for them to adapt to a changing environment.

Whenever their kind of legalistic approach to ethics takes control of religious expression, you will find that cultural stagnation sets in. You can see it still today in the ultra-orthodox Jewish sects, and of course in the fundamentalist Islamic sects that have caused such devastation around the world.

It was precisely this of course within medieval Christianity that led to the reformation. The Roman Catholic Church sets its traditions on a par with Scripture, and as a result, it cannot adapt to modernity – it cannot change. Indeed it takes pride in its motto '*semper idem*' – always the same.

By contrast, the reformers insisted that Christians must constantly go back to the foundation documents of the faith – to the Bible – in order to reconsider and if necessary 'reform' the beliefs and practices they had received through church tradition.

Jesus himself was such a reformer – challenging the hidebound tradition of the elders – and centering moral obedience instead on his twin principles of love.

Reformation is an essential and ongoing imperative if the church is not to become hopelessly out-of-date.

To sum up:

Here we have it – two groups of influential Jewish leaders. The Sadducees – not unlike John’s bishop – clerics who were at home ministering from the altar but who had doubts about much of the Bible and miracles like resurrection. And the Pharisees – not unlike Daniel’s conservative evangelical background – keen Bible students with a puritan obsession about behaving differently from the secular world. Each of them used the Bible to defend their own distinctive point of view. And, as we see in this passage, each of them collided with Jesus because he used the Bible too, but in a way quite different from them. He saw the Bible as the story of a God who sought personal relationship with human individuals – a relationship that death could not destroy. He saw biblical law, not as invitation to develop casuistry, but as an expression of the love which that personal relationship with God awakens in the heart.

The fact that these religious leaders of his day used the Bible to criticise him never undermined his own respect for sacred text. Again and again, he acknowledges that what Scripture says, God says. It was his answer to the Devil in the day of temptation: *‘It is written!’* he said. And it was the source of his understanding of his own divine sonship and messianic mission. *‘I have not come to abolish the Scriptures’* he said, *‘but to fulfil them’*.

But the fulfilment he brought was unlike anything the Jewish rabbis had been expecting. He brought revolutionary insights to his exposition of the Bible that exposed their traditions for the reactionary folly that they were. Armed with his new way of interpreting the Bible, his disciples engaged with the pagan world and conquered it in a way that Judaism, locked in its cultural box, could never hope to do.

The challenge for Christian today is to be faithful to the genius of their Master in this respect. To honour the Bible as the inspired Word of God – but constantly re-examining their interpretation of that sacred text to better understand what God requires of believers not 2000 years ago but today.

That of course is the thrust of the text you have chosen as your theme:

Matthew 13:52:

‘Every scribe who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.’

The people of God still need Bible scholars – but they need scholars who, while remaining faithful to the unchanging Word of God, bring new reforming insight – as Jesus did – to their interpretation of that Word. The Bible is *‘semper idem’* (always the same) – but our understanding of it constantly advances.

Some of you may know that I am fond of quoting the words of John Robinson’s farewell speech to the Pilgrim Fathers in this connection:

‘I am persuaded that the Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from his Word.’