

By the book

Jeremiah 31:27-34, 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5, Luke 18:1-8 Rev J Shannon

I was very lucky. I grew up in a house of books. We had floor to ceiling bookshelves in most rooms and both my parents were avid readers. The lounge room had the tallest bookshelf. The top shelf was where my parents put books we were *not* supposed to read. That's where the naughty cartoons lived and novels like *Lolita* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*¹. ... So, of course, my brother and I poured over them as soon as we were tall enough to reach by standing on the back of the sofa. Up there too, was this Bible. I think it was up there because it was precious, not because it was dangerous but never the less, putting it out of reach made it *really* attractive.

I pulled it down and after marvelling at its cover², I let it fall open. And thus, I discovered the psalms. I must have been about 11. I instantly fell in love with psalms, especially the lamentations. I have always loved poetry but that was something different. Imagine a God that you could tell anything to; A God on which you could release your anger; a God you could tell your sorrows; complain, weep, and shout for joy. There was an intimacy in the psalms. A nearness. They were so personal, it was like reading someone's mail.

Oh yea, that's what we've been doing in Timothy for a month!

As you know, my Sunday school experience was an unhappy and short-lived experience. Later, in school, we had a Catholic priest whose job was to teach "moral development". That was a failure as well because by 14, we knew sex education from a celibate was probably not credible advice.

I read the Bible cover to cover. First when I was 11 and again at about 14. Most of it did not make sense but it proved useful. Later, I had a summer job as a tour guide in Israel and could spin off stories based on locations. I don't want to disillusion you but each of the tour guides had a favourite Lot's wife – and none were the same. It was more a matter route convenience.

I went to theological college – not because I was a Christian but because I understood that I had very poor religious education. I had been to a conference with my sister-in-law and heard some of the most imminent theologians in the world...and while fascinated, I knew a lot of it went over my

¹ Books that were banned when I arrived in Australia

² The Bible in question has a metal bass relief of Rachel's Tomb embedded in the cover

head. There was a lot of assumed knowledge – that I didn't have. Boy, was that humbling.

So off to college I went with no objective other than to be better educated. And a funny thing happened. The more I understood academically how, who, structure, history, context, politics, language, jokes, divergent streams of faith, apologetics, and so on, the clearer the voice of God rose out of the noise. Like Paul said in Timothy's letter, God breathes through scripture. It was like I had to understand all that to clear the underbrush. I found my faith deepening and deepening.

That is how the voice of God speaks through our history. That is why, every now and then, we need to stop and look at the place of the Bible with the people of God ...and celebrate. It is a wonder that we have these texts. No, not just a wonder. It is a miracle. This is not a time to flatten the word with fundamentalist or simplistic interpretations nor it is time to water down everything with history and myth. We yearn to understand the significance of what we read.

Three of this week's texts are about that – we have been given a user's manual – better than IKEA but still confusing. I mean how simple are those IKEA pictures?! Honestly, you can't get any simpler – so why can't we understand them?

The final text, Luke's story, is generally used by preachers to remind people that an essential ingredient in understanding is prayer. Reading the Bible and prayer must go hand in hand.

My religious rebellion, as you figured, started quite early when people purported to *tell* me what was in the Bible and what it meant. Most people who do that assume you have never read it. I promised myself, I would never do that. Nor would I sugar-coat, skip over hard stuff or pretend that I knew what was in God's mind.

People don't like it when I say Lydia called Paul out – not because it isn't true but because it isn't polite and it didn't/doesn't fit the social norms where the man is always right. He is the powerful one – especially if he is a disciple. But Paul names his mistakes in many places. He was a learning creature. It was only future generations who were uncomfortable with the exchange and so translated it into "Paul converts Lydia". Truth will never hurt the text. God speaks through despite us.

My decision to enter ministry was uncompromising but also a bit of a crusade. A friend told me about an exchange between a young Steve Jobs (remember he started Apple) and a man who was the President of PepsiCo. Jobs was trying to recruit Scully to his fledgling company. Scully was already a success. Why would he give it up. He offered to be a mentor or an advisor and Job's response was, "Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water, or do you want a chance to change the world?"³

That story blew me out of the water because it describes my life before Ministry. I was already a success – but I was selling sugared-water. I promised I would never water down scripture.

Paul speaks to Timothy of his experience and encourages Timothy to keep on learning and discerning. He warns there is a lot of false teachings and he shouldn't fall for them. "Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed" "Hold to the standard of sound teaching". Scholarship is more important than impressions. "Guard the good treasure" Paul's letters are part of the user manual as he helps shape and encourage Timothy in his ministry.

In addition, Paul refers to other sources. Timothy not only learned from scripture, he was taught by others, his elders, including his mother and grandmother. Both these women were significant in his spiritual formation. He read commentaries. A broad education leads to better understanding and Paul was aware of the risks of such diverse discussions but...they are important, and...

What is clear is that scripture provides the basis for "teaching, reproof, corrections and for training in righteousness". So Timothy can parent or guide others. That's what parent do. They guide, They teach and when necessary they correct behaviour.

Scripture works even as a collection of writings across centuries; with a series of writers and editors; who added flourishes and commentary and then subjected the texts through an unbelievable number of translations. Yes, meaning did become somewhat obscure and sometimes over-simplified but as a whole body of knowledge – it works.

Now onto our 3rd reading today – the story of the pesky widow and the judge. We talked about how most preachers told us this story was designed to teach us persistent prayer. That may be so. It could mean prayer in the Celtic sense,

³ Odyssey: Pepsi to Apple Harper Collins 1987, ISBN13 9780006383437, p.90

continuous throughout the day giving to God every act and grateful for every morsel. I worry that some may take it that if you pester God enough, you'll get what you want.

The story is designed to be humorous. Yes, believe me the Bible has humour – we just sometimes forget.

We were told in our Bible studies to focus on the widow...and that persistence in prayer is 'rooted in the character of God' and that the stinginess of the judge was meant to contrast with the generosity of God. I CAN imagine a pesky God – otherwise, I wouldn't be here. But again, I think they've over-simplified.

So no matter how obscure this humorous story is – God sits in the middle of it – somewhere but probably not as either of the characters but as the observing character that enables – the ultimate judge. It is possible that God makes good things happen despite us?

No instruction manual is perfect. We know that. And having wrestled with manuals translated from other languages, this has some similarities of things lost in translation⁴. But like any parenting, much is based on what we've been taught. A lot of it is intuition and experience but truth is, we hear the cries, we take the hands and we comfort. That is what the text tells us God hears, God guides. We need to look and look again. I'll always remember the sign outside a Denver Lutheran Church that said, "we take the Bible seriously, not literally" We can never stop yearning and never stop learning. Amen.

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⁴ Don't start me on Japanese to English!