

The Bible Series – session 1

Introduction

Most of us love a good story. Not just for children, at every age we can get drawn into a good narrative, enjoy meeting the characters, and delight in the twists and turns of a good plot, and especially one that has a happy ending. Books and films can be a great escape from everyday life. And they speak to a universal desire, a widespread longing, to be part of a bigger and better story. This is especially true during challenging times such as we're living through now.

The Bible presents a bigger and better story, a story that provides guidance and comfort and hope both in the challenges and the opportunities of life. In our services over the next seven weeks we will be looking at the Bible and the big story that each of us we are invited to become part of.

For many people, the Bible is a big and complicated book that can be rather overwhelming. So it is probably sensible before plunging in at the deep end to stand back for a brief survey of what we will be exploring in subsequent weeks. This first session then will give an overview of three key features of the Bible – namely that it is a book, it is a story, and it is a revelation.

A book

Firstly then ring Bible is a book. The word Bible actually comes from a Greek word *biblia* simply meaning books and the word scripture means writings. These are not actually religious terms. The word Bible is just referring to the fact that it is a book. But it is not any old book. It is the best-selling book of all time. You may be familiar with Hunger Games - it sold around 50 million copies. You may be familiar with the Lord of the Rings trilogy - it's now sold around 150 million copies. According to the Guinness Book of records, around 5 billion copies of the Bible have been sold or distributed. So the Bible is a phenomenally popular book. but when you open it up you realise that actually it's not one book but many, written by around 40 different authors, together forming an ancient library.

The Bible was all finished and written around 2000 years ago. So sometimes when we read it we find that bits of it can appear a little strange or unfamiliar, coming as it does from another cultural context. Try reading the Bible with a child and you will soon find that you are being asked questions like 'why don't we sacrifice any animals?', 'what is a concubine?' and 'how come Jesus gets away with spitting in people's eyes?!' The Bible is an amazing book because it is able to spark the imagination of both children and adults, and connect with people of all intellects and interests.

I remember as a child being introduced to the well-known stories of the Bible and loving the colour and drama, and a whole host of memorable characters. But as I got older I started reading the Bible for myself and found a whole new dimension of which I had previously been unaware - philosophy, ethics, poetry, history, psychology. The whole range of human relationships and the gritty, messiness of life can be found within those pages. You don't need to be a great reader or have a massive intellect to be able to appreciate and benefit from the Bible. If you want wisdom, if you want truth and guidance, this is the world's best seller for a good reason, and you might be surprised if you dip into it what you might find.

A story

So the Bible is a book. Secondly the Bible is our human story. One of the least recognised things about the Bible is that it makes up one large story with a beginning, a middle, and an end that all holds together. It's not just a collection of religious sayings, or a moral code. It's a beautiful story, a story that we will be exploring together through the next few weeks. Even though it was written by around 40 different authors over a period of over 1000 years, it is remarkable that it forms a single story that makes sense and has coherence and harmony.

The Bible then is one large story, but not just any old story, this is our human story. It opens with that famous opening line 'in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth'. If that sounds like the opening line of a story that is relevant to every human being on planet earth, that's because it is. The Bible

claims to tell the true human story: where we've come from, why we're here, and where we're going. So throughout this series we're not so much looking at if you like 'Christian' or 'religious' questions as much as we're looking at *human* questions, because the Bible claims to be relevant to all humans. The Bible is a book which helps us to make sense of who we are as human beings and what it means to flourish on planet earth, even in challenging times.

Over the next six sessions we're going to have a birds-eye view of the whole Bible story, seeing how each of the six parts of the Bible connects with our deep human needs and desires. We will be starting on the details next session, but for now let me give you something of a route map for where we will be going.

- Next session we're going to look at Origins and Meaning. The Bible begins at the dawn of time and makes sense of our human desire for meaning because it answers in the book of Genesis questions like "where have we come from?", and "why are we here?"
- The next session is entitled Exodus and Freedom which focuses on the story of the Old Testament which focuses in on one nation, Israel. We'll follow their journey for a bit including how they end up enslaved in Egypt under pharaoh. Now today we may not be physically imprisoned, but we can still feel trapped in negative cycles of anxiety and fear, loneliness and guilt, stress and debt. And these things can leave us feeling enslaved. Well the Bible is a story of freedom. We're going to see - from Israel escaping

from slavery in Egypt through the exodus story - how we can find true freedom.

- We then think about Exile and Peace. The story moves onto a dark period for Israel. They get taken captive from their homeland. Life falls apart from them. They lose all that's familiar and safe and they make this terrifying journey to Babylon where they are enslaved for 70 years. It's called the exile and it helps us to grapple the questions like 'why does God allow suffering?' and 'where is God when life falls apart?' and 'how can I find peace in the storms?' The Bible is so relevant to these issues.
- Next we have the arrival of the Messiah - Jesus Christ. As we look at the centre of the Bible we begin to discover Jesus, who shows us what God's love looks like for you and for me. Messiah and Love.
- Then in part five of the big story we look at Spirit and Community and how the Holy Spirit comes and fills human beings in a new way, and how we fit into the story. It is *our* chapter and is about how to join into the community of God's people where we find belonging and where we no longer need to feel alone or isolated, and we find purpose. The Spirit helps us to understand what life is all about.
- And finally in the last session will look at Hope and Home. Where is this human story of ours headed? What is our ultimate home? Well, the Bible concludes with beautiful scenes of a world restored, resurrected human beings, and ultimate hope to look forward to, and it gives us confidence in the storms of life.

We need this big story of the Bible. There are so many uncertainties that we are facing right now, but this series invites us through Jesus Christ to put our trust in him and join in with this great big story that is certain and secure, and in which we find a new confidence and peace to live by. The Bible is our human story. It's not just a dusty old religious book for vicars and nuns, it's for everyone to experience and enjoy.

A revelation

So the Bible is the best-selling book, the Bible is our human story that makes sense of life, and lastly, and very briefly the Bible is a divine message. As we mentioned earlier, different human authors from different backgrounds and cultures and with very different personalities wrote the Bible over a number of centuries. But the astonishing claim of the Bible itself that has been believed and experienced to be true by Christians for centuries is that behind the human authors was a divine author. 2 Timothy 3:16 encapsulates this idea: "all scripture is inspired by God" or more literally "all scripture is God-breathed". In other words, God spoke to the human authors inspiring their writings and words so that when we read the Bible it isn't just an ancient dusty book, it is a means by which God can communicate with us today. It is my prayer that as together over the coming weeks we look at and soak ourselves in the Bible, we would each hear God's voice, and experience his presence and blessing.