Southwark Diocesan Theological Conversations
Biblical Hermeneutics, Henriette Howarth, June 2015

An opening prayer
Light from light
Creation from chaos
Life from death
Joy from sorrow
Hope from despair
Peace from hate
   All your gifts, all your love, all your power.
   All from your word, fresh from your word,
   all gifts of your speech.
We give thanks for your world-forming speech.
Thanks as well for our speech back to you,
the speech of mothers and fathers
who dared to speak
   in faith and unfaith
   in trust and in distrust
   in grateful memory and in high hurt.
We cherish this speech as we trust yours.
Listen this day for the groans and yearnings of your world,
listen to our own songs of joy and our own drudges of death,
and in the midst of our stammering,
speak your clear word of life
In the name of your word come flesh
Amen
By Walter Brueggemann, from Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth, p. 70

In this paper I will only be able to scratch the surface of the complicated business of hermeneutics! Please read some of the books or articles recommended at the end if you want to go deeper into it. Especially Steve Chalke's article is a good introduction. This paper is meant as a conversation starter. I will try to describe some of the issues of hermeneutics which underlie various contemporary debates and discussions in the church. I aim to create some clarity mainly for myself but hopefully for others as well. So often in a theological conversation we quote Bible texts and passages without really explaining or understanding the complexities of how we come to a particular understanding of the biblical text. As a result people stand over against each other and part ways, rather than join hands in the hermeneutic process we are all involved in: opening the biblical text and trying to let it speak afresh into the issues we face. Whether we agree or not in terms of the outcome, at least we can have a sense of community as we approach the Scriptures. It has been a privilege to write this paper and to have had the excuse to go back to some of the basics. I studied theology in the Netherlands in the eighties and I majored in OT studies. This was at a time when there were fierce discussions going on about method: ranging from historical criticism dominated by German scholars with roots in the Enlightenment, to the canonical approach launched by BS Childs, to various post-modern readings of the Bible influenced by for example liberation, feminist and post-colonial theology. At the time there was a sense that only one approach could be right, whereas we are now in a new era of Biblical studies with more acknowledgement that various ways of reading Scripture have their validity as long as we are clear about the method we use.
1. Introduction – the Bible

For most people in the church, the Bible is foundational to their belief and practice as Christians. This is certainly the case for clergy in the Anglican Church and I guess in most denominations. In the ordination service for deacons and priests, the questions are asked: ‘Do you accept the Holy Scriptures as revealing all things necessary for eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ?’ with the answer ‘I do so accept them’ and ‘Will you be diligent in prayer, in reading Holy Scripture, and in all studies that will deepen your faith and fit you to bear witness to the truth of the gospel?’ with the answer ‘By the help of God I will.’ There is a commitment in the church to this ancient, sacred text, these traditions, the Holy Scriptures which have been handed down through the centuries and have inspired and nurtured people throughout history and all over the world. With the commitment comes the expectation that the Scriptures will speak afresh in every generation and in every context. There is also a commitment to the study of the Scriptures. From time to time we need to renew our knowledge and understanding of biblical hermeneutics and interpretation, so that we can then hold difficult conversations with more confidence, respect, honesty and clarity.

In the church, there is an expectation that the Bible will be a guide in the complex world that we live in. In debates, conversations, discussions, the question will come up at some point, ‘What does the Bible say about this?’ Which will then be followed by more debates and conversations as we don’t always agree on the answer. But outside the church, amongst the younger generations, but even amongst Christians, another question arises more and more frequently: Is the Bible still relevant? How can an ancient text relate to the issues we are facing in our times? People struggle especially with the violence and patriarchy attested to in the texts. There also seems to be a growing sense as we become more aware of the vastness of the universe and the expansion of time, that the Bible is very limited – how can a limited historical text ever fully capture what God is like? This questioning of the Bible reflects a deeper questioning of God himself and the way we talk about Him in church. Rob Bell, an influential American Christian speaker voices the question that many people have, in his book What we talk about when we talk about God: ‘Can God keep up with the modern world?’

In the church we hopefully agree that the Bible is relevant and it is part of our mission to demonstrate that to the world. We do that not only in debates but also in our liturgy, sermons, spirituality and pastoral ministry. The Bible stories are still known and have the power to resonate with people’s lives. Demonstrating the relevance of the Bible especially in moral issues is a hard task as the Bible doesn’t always seem to speak unambiguously in contemporary debates. Often the Bible seems to divide rather than unite. Calling upon the same Bible, people come to opposite opinions for example regarding sexual ethics, especially whether the Bible would support homosexual marriage or not. Or whether the Bible supports the ordination of women as bishops. At Bishop Libby’s consecration, a man spoke out and said ‘not according to the Bible’ after the Archbishop of York presented the legalities of the consecration. Of course this was an isolated and lone voice at this particular moment in time but we all know that in the history of the emancipation of women, the Bible has been used by both sides to support their cause. The Bible has been a source of oppression. But the Bible has also been a powerful source of liberation.
Sometimes it has been the same Bible story, for example the Exodus story about Israel’s liberation from Egypt which has meant freedom for one people group but oppression for another. The Palestinian theologian Naim Ateek has done interesting work on this as he points out the negative attitude in the ‘first Exodus story’ towards the indigenous people of the promised land. The Exodus story: liberation for some, oppression for others. Is it possible to say: the teaching of the Bible is..., followed by particular doctrines or ethics? Are we then not reading our own doctrines and ethics and opinions into the Bible? How can we refrain from doing so while we continue to hold on to the Bible as our main source of revelation? Throughout history the church has never given up on the Bible and it won’t do so now. Somehow the Bible continues to invite us into dialogue and conversation.

If we are confident about some of the basic intentions of the Bible, it will be easier to have respectful and honest conversations with others. Confidence is not the same as certainty. We live in ‘post-modern times’ where people, especially the younger generation are soaked in a culture where we don’t know for certain, and where we remain open to what others think or what new evidence may still reveal itself. We are also fortunate enough to be exposed to different cultures and engage with different disciplines especially the sciences. A greater humility is called for especially as the history of published Biblical interpretation has been heavily western, male and academic. The Biblical theologian R.S. Sugirtharajah has called for this awareness ever since the publication of his *Voices from the Margin* in 1991. It is part of the hermeneutical theory that our horizons are constantly expanding though time and space and therefore it is helpful to ask old questions afresh. Questions such as: What kind of text is the Bible? What kind of authority does the Bible have? What is the meaning of the text? Who are our conversation partners?

### 2. What kind of book is the Bible?

At the danger of ‘going back to basics’ I think the most foundational question is: what kind of text is the Bible? What do we mean when we say Bible? Even though the original word *biblia* means library or books, most of us will think of the single book we hold in our hands: from Genesis to Revelation, in the translation that we feel most comfortable with. But actually the Bible has a slightly different content for Protestants, Catholics and the Orthodox. A large part of the Bible is also sacred for the Jewish community. The Bible is hugely diverse in itself. And the Bible has been published in many different translations and is read and interpreted by an enormous variety of people. Is it even right to call this book the ‘Bible’ which gives the impression that it is a closed, single-themed book when it actually is a collection of books with many themes functioning in many different ways open to different interpretations. The history of the Bible and Bible interpretation shows that it is different from any other book.

What clues do the Scriptures give about what kind of text they are? The Scriptures’ content is diverse: different genres, such as poetry, prose, narrative, law, history, liturgy, testimony, letters etc. The Scriptures are not trying to exclude counter voices but are able to hold diversity and ambiguity, for example the two creation stories, the four gospels, the king and prophet traditions in the OT, various metaphors for God: shepherd and king, father and mother, a warrior and a servant. There are many Psalms, expressing different situations in life and suggesting different responses from God. There is not just 1 story or just 1 image or just 1 Psalm or just 1 key to understand the OT. The Scriptures themselves indicate that they are diverse and rich and therefore invite to be explored and need to be approached with an open mind.
There are many passages in the Scriptures in which the OT is being quoted or used. Jesus takes liberties in the interpretation or even quotation of it, which clashed with the rabbis of his time, for example his interpretation of the sabbath and the food laws. The OT Scriptures seem to have been something that he lived with, he walked with and he drew from and he encouraged his disciples to do the same, as we for example see in Luke 24 on the road to Emmaus. We also need to keep in mind that Jesus didn’t have the Bible as we know it. ‘Our Bible’ is a collection of books which reached its ‘final version’ post-canonical. This is a further indication that ‘What does the Bible say’, may not be the right question. What does God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) say through the Scriptures, is better! The ‘Word of God’ as mentioned in the Scriptures, for example in Isaiah 55:11 or Hebrews 4:12, doesn’t equal ‘the Bible’.

From the Scriptures we learn that the question may not just be ‘what kind of text is the Bible?’, but ‘what is the intention of the Bible?’ What direction does it take us? What is the narrative that we are part of? This is where Biblical Theologies are important as they draw out the great themes such as creation, community, faith, liberation, and mission. Biblical Theologies help us to extract the bigger narrative and to get to know God’s character – not by just looking at one text or even various texts but the whole Scripture and the reception of text by faith communities throughout history. Tom Wright’s model of the Bible being a play of 5 acts and the church being in the 5th act and needing to improvise and continue the script in the vein of the previous acts and with the knowledge of its ending in Revelation is helpful. We have a freedom to improvise but are held by the bigger narrative. I am very much inspired by OT theologian Walter Brueggemann who emphasizes that the Scriptures are held by the faith community and the leading question should be: “How will a reading of the text help us as a church to engage the public crises of our time? Such study of the witness of ancient Israel is not an end in itself, but instead enables the Old Testament as scripture of the church to serve as a resource that empowers us as God’s people for our own faithful response to the needs of a broken world.”

I guess that all answers to the question ‘What kind of text is the Bible?’ are somewhere on the spectrum between ‘the Bible is a collection of historical and culturally conditioned documents’ and ‘the Bible is the Word of God containing timeless truths’. Our positions don’t need to be fixed. We can move on the spectrum. (We will discuss this further when we look at the hermeneutic process.) This is all part of the Bible being alive and active. (Hebrew 4:12) As long as we are aware where we are and where our conversation partners are, we can have good dialogues about the meaning of Scripture! I suggest that we can, like the rabbinic Midrash tradition, be more playful with Scripture - holding on to its authority but at the same time being open to multiple interpretations and applications.

**For discussion**
What image would you use to describe the Bible? What do you think is the main intention of the Bible? How much freedom do we have to ‘improvise’ as Tom Wright calls it?

**3. Question of authority**
Once we agree that the Bible, whether we read it more as a historical document or as the Word of God, is a treasure entrusted to us which holds the key to a greater understanding of God and his intentions for the world, we can ask the following question: what authority
does the Bible have? Does authority mean that the Bible tells us exactly what to do and what to believe? Or can it be as loose as: the Bible shows us the way, inspires us, gives us guidance and direction? Is it just the Bible that holds that kind of authority over us? It has been an ongoing discussion between Protestants and Catholics as to how much authority is given to Scripture, (Sola Scriptura) or to the tradition of the Church. In the Anglican Church we hold on to Scripture, Tradition and Reason as three corner stones of our faith with Scripture firmly in the centre. History teaches us again and again that we think we give prime authority to the Bible, but actually it is our own reason or our traditions which provide the lens through which we read and apply the Bible. More recently there has been a call to bring in ‘experience’ as another source of authority. The experience of being a woman, of being poor or rich, of being disabled etc. gives us a knowledge of who God is for us and how he might want us to shape our doctrines, faith and practice.

Wright makes a very clear case that authority belongs to God himself. ‘Authority, according to the Bible, is vested in God himself, Father, Son and Spirit…’. (Matthew 28:18 All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.) ‘How does God exercise this authority? … We need to read the Bible to find out. He works through Jesus and the spirit, with love, wisdom and compassion... with an intention to liberate and re-create humankind and the world.’

The question is whether we hear God, Father Son and Holy Spirit, just through the Bible? Would we not all say that God is bigger than the Bible? God reveals himself through the Bible. Can we know his character in any other way? Some would say: through nature, through experience, through the church, through reason. But we also need the Bible to check whether we have experienced him through those other means in line with the biblical revelation. Some would say that we hear from God mainly through Jesus, the Word of God, but we know about Jesus and the salvation he brings, only through the Bible. We come back to the word dialogue, conversation and interplay. There is an interplay between the text, the author, the reader and God. It seems to be God’s character, God’s way of doing things to communicate himself through the human life of Jesus and the historical books of Scripture. We need God himself, Father, Son and Spirit as the constant point of reference. After all, at the end of time, God will be all in all, and we won’t need Scripture anymore.

For discussion: Is God bigger than the Bible? What is the role of the Bible when we look to God to speak into contemporary issues which were beyond the biblical world’s experience? (For example the issues of climate change, homosexual marriage, genetic engineering, medical ethics.)

4. Interpretation of the Bible - Hermeneutical circle.
Anthony Thiselton starts his book Hermeneutics, an Introduction (2009) with the following definition: ‘Hermeneutics explores how we read, understand and handle texts especially those written in another time or in a context of life different from our own. Biblical hermeneutics investigates more specifically how we read, understand, apply and respond to biblical texts.' Hermeneutics is the whole process which leads us as the readers to interpret the biblical text or to find meaning in a text. There are various players in this process: the text, the author, the reader, the community around the author, the community around the reader, various traditions, the canon, the church, the society and God himself. Whereas exegesis is about finding out as close as we can, what the original
author or the text intends to say, first of all in its own historical context, interpretation goes a step further and asks the question: what does this mean for us?

In the history of Bible interpretation, the realisation of the hermeneutical process was significant and what Thiselton calls a 'turning point'. It was Schleiermacher who introduced the term ‘hermeneutical circle’ in the beginning of the 19th century. It means (amongst other complicated things) that there is an ongoing back and forth movement or dialogue between the text and the reader in the effort of finding the meaning of the text. This was a different way of understanding meaning from the Reformation and the Enlightenment, when meaning was mainly found within the text and therefore more objectively attainable and more related to historical truth. Now two centuries and many other philosophers and biblical interpreters later, most would agree that all readers come to the Bible with pre-conceived ideas, with a multitude of experiences, with questions, ideas and expectations. We all read the Bible through a lens. In our post-modern culture this is welcomed. We want to hear individual stories, experiences and meanings. It may even be that this post-modern thinking is closer to the biblical thinking and the eastern culture. Schleiermacher and Gadamer called the practice of hermeneutics an ‘art’ rather than a ‘science’ which implies that the process is creative and the outcome may not be certain. This means we have to let go of certainty, of right and wrong which would be a standpoint that suits us well in the age of postmodernism. Throughout history we see radical changes in the ways people viewed Scripture: Reformation, Enlightenment, and now the postmodern times which was already announced by Schleiermacher.

As we engage with the text there is progress, we are not going round in hermeneutic circles. The circle becomes smaller, but can then also suddenly become bigger again. We can never quite catch THE meaning: especially not if we have conversation partners. Thiselton introduced the idea of two horizons: the biblical and contemporary horizons and somehow in this process of interpretation the horizons need to merge, but they never will of course. Our own horizon keeps expanding. New issues can suddenly come up. The Bible is the living word: it can mean different things in different contexts. As the reader we need to be open to this and have ‘preliminary’ interpretations. The question is whether the institutional church can facilitate this flexibility and openness. Having Tradition and Reason next to Scripture provides the possibility for this kind of openness and flexibility.

For discussion: Can we ever catch THE meaning of a Bible text or passage or story?

5. Bread not stone.
The feminist theologian Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza called for a transformation of ‘our metaphor of Scripture as ‘tablets of stone’ on which the unchanging word of God is engraved for all times into the image of bread that nurtures, sustains, and energizes women as people of God in our struggles against injustice and oppression.’ I like this image of ‘bread’ as it resonates with the biblical image for Jesus, the bread of life. Bread needs to be broken to be shared. In our reading and interpretation of Scripture we try to break the Bible open. Stone wouldn’t allow us to do that easily. But bread does. We keep coming back to the Bible to do this breaking and sharing. And the Bible never stops doing the nurturing and the transforming. This process of breaking, sharing, feeding and transformation however is not possible without God himself who is the One who inspired the stories to be written down, who by his Spirit sheds light on the biblical text and who in Jesus shows what it is all about. When we get stuck in the process, in our conversations,
in our understanding it may be time to stand back a little, and to pray more deeply for the Spirit to come and renew our understanding of Scripture.

6. Case studies
Our understanding of Scripture and Bible interpretation can be tested by looking at specific Bible passages, stories or themes. For example the text ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’, or the theme of the Sabbath, the Exodus story, the land etc. We can ask various questions to probe and to open the Bible on the levels of historical context, literary context, canonical context, our own context. Such an approach will bring forth a thorough understanding of the text, passage and theme. It will result in a dialogue of the multiple historical and biblical voices with the context of the reading communities. This process will set boundaries in place so that the text won’t just mean anything. It will provide a limit as to what we allow the text to mean. There can be interpretations which are ‘wrong’ or ‘invalid’. In any context whether it is academic research, a church Bible study group, a Scriptural Reasoning setting or sermon writing, the parameters of history and an understanding of our own context need to be respected. Even then there is still the possibility that God surprises believers with immediate revelations which resonate in our lives with a freshness and immediacy that no academic research or Bible study group could ever have facilitated. In our reflection on such a revelation, we still return to the Bible to see whether it is in tune with what we already know about God.

For Discussion: Do you think the Bible itself indicates that God continues to speak in new ways and that he may be doing that in our times? There is a development of God’s self-revelation in the Bible culminating in Jesus. Is God speaking in new ways to us today which requires new language which goes beyond the Bible but is not against it? For example the discussion about whether we can use feminine language for God. In other words, is the Bible a force that moves us on into new areas of speaking about God or a force that holds us back?

7. Bibliography and conversation partners

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