

Word of Life - Reflection

Jeremiah 31:27-34

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Luke 18:1-8

Many years ago, just before I first started studying theology, I was given a "Christian counselling" workbook as a first foray into theological studies. The premise of this workbook is that "Christian Counselling" – and I deliberately use the inverted commas – can be summed up as "memorise these verses and that will solve everything."

Depression? There's a verse for that. Anxiety? Also a verse for that? What about domestic and family violence??? You get the picture. I hope that Christian Counselling has developed from there, but even 25 years ago it hardly related to counselling best practice. This approach was justified by misusing part of today's passage from second Timothy:

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

The whole argument was rather circular – this passage said that all Scripture was inspired by God, and therefore, because this passage is considered scripture, it must be literally true. As usual, there is a lot more to the story.

The first issue is what the author of this passage considered "scripture." In the passage, the Greek is unclear whether this refers to a particular excerpt, book, or the whole of Scripture.

This letter was written by the 110s CE, as it is extensively quoted by Polycarp in 114CE, and internal evidence suggests it was written after Acts (~80s CE). It is written at a time when the church is becoming more organised – and we hear some of this in the text. It is also written after the Jewish leaders have defined their Scripture to only include books written originally in Hebrew. As a result, the early church had to start reflecting on how they defined Scripture.

The answer to the question did not have the same limitations as the definition used by the Jews. If you look at a Catholic Bible, or a Bible with the Apocrypha, you will discover quite a range of books – and additional chapters – that were not included in the Jewish definition of Scripture because they were originally written in Greek. They are found in other versions of the Bible, because the early church did recognise these books as scripture.

On the other hand, there are other books, such as the Didache or "Teaching of the Twelve Apostles" that was considered on a level of Scripture for the early church, but has disappeared from our Bibles and was only rediscovered in the last 200 years. We also need to remember that some of our current Bible was not yet written at this point. This all simply adds confusion to the question of what is the "scripture" to which the author is referring.

So, if the author of this letter was not referring to the Bible as we know it, what is this verse about? As with much of the biblical text, it only has the potential for clarity when we see it in its greater context. In this case, it is in the middle of a letter about Christian leadership. It

is also a letter that look towards the future of what the church will be in generations after the leadership by those who knew Jesus personally. This is a significant change for the early church and much reflection was needed guard against the primitive church from wandering away from the teachings of Jesus. It is one of the reasons we have the Gospels, which were also written around this time, or perhaps a little earlier.

It was not without good reason this was a concern for the early church, as already there had been false teachers on a variety of subjects. At first there had been disagreements about how to understand the teachings of Jesus – such as the question of whether one had to be Jewish in order to be Christian. Around the time this letter was being written, debate about the nature of Christ had begun. There were those who said that if Christ was really God, then all the suffering of the crucifixion could not have happened. The argument was that, to the Greek mind, suffering implied change, and change implied imperfection... and God had to be perfect. This went with a whole range of explanations as to what “really” happened.

And therefore in the context of this debate, in the context of looking at what Christian leadership means, the author of this letter writes that all scripture is God-breathed and useful “for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” In essence, the author says to go back to the wisdom of old to understand who God is and to learn what that means for the present time, especially in relation to Christian leadership.

I could end here, but I think that would make this more a first-year lecture than a reflection, so let us take some time to think about what this means for life. How we understand and respond to Scripture shapes how we understand our life experiences, or the experiences of other people. I think our Old Testament reading tells us something of what this means. In it, we hear a realisation that old proverbs no longer work for the people's experience, and a new proverb is developed. Through reflection on their Scriptures, as well as life experience, tradition, and other forms of learning, there is theological reflection that helps the Exiles with their experiences of what is happening now.

Like the Exiles, like the leaders who received this Epistle, we also need to critically reflect on our context and how the ancient wisdom of our Scriptures can speak into today's world. This will never be simply a case of looking up the answers, but ongoing and deep engagement in exploring how these words can give insight into a new context. It is only by doing this that we will retain our relevance for a new generation.

I wonder where the affirmation or challenge is for you in these words. What have you been taught about the Bible over the years that helps this reflection process? What have you been taught that hinders it? What is God saying to you at this time?