

Archbishop of Canterbury - church needs to listen properly to the bible

Apr. 16, 2007 -- The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, has told an audience of theological students that both intensely liberal and ultra conservative readings of the Bible are 'rootless' and are limited in what they can contribute to the life of the church. In the Larkin Stuart lecture, delivered today at an event hosted jointly by Wycliffe and Trinity theological colleges in Toronto, Dr Williams said that Christians need to reconnect with scripture as something to be listened to and heard in the context of Jesus's invitation to the Eucharist and to work for the Kingdom.

"... The Church's public use of the Bible represents the Church as defined in some important way by listening: the community when it comes together doesn't only break bread and reflect together and intercede, it silences itself to hear something. It represents itself in that moment as a community existing in response to a word of summons or invitation, to an act of communication that requires to be heard and answered."

This, he argues, is crucial in the way in which the communities of Christians are informed by what the Scriptures say:

"Take Scripture out of this context of the invitation to sit at table with Jesus and to be incorporated into his labour and suffering for the Kingdom, and you will be treating Scripture as either simply an inspired supernatural guide for individual conduct or a piece of detached historical record - the typical exaggerations of Biblicist and liberal approaches respectively."

"For the former, the work of the Spirit is more or less restricted to the transformation of the particular believer; for the latter, the life of the community is where the Spirit is primarily to be heard and discerned, with Scripture an illuminating adjunct at certain points."

Dr Williams says that neither isolating texts from their contexts nor dismissing them as limited by prevalent cultural understanding were helpful approaches. Quoting from St John's Gospel, Dr Williams said that Jesus's teaching that 'no-one can come to the Father except by me' (John 14 v 6) could not be used simply as a trump card in discussions with other faiths:

the verse needed to be heard in its full biblical context as the development of the question posed by his earlier saying, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' (John 13 v 33).

" ... This certainly does not suggest in a direct way a more inclusive approach to other faiths. But the point is that the actual question being asked is not about the fate of non-

Christians; it is about how the disciples are to understand the death of Jesus as the necessary clearing of the way which they are to walk."

Similarly, St Paul's denunciation of homosexuality in Romans 1 v 27 also needed to be properly heard as an ancillary point in an argument about another matter entirely. That did not diminish its force but made it harder either to discard it or to use it as a definite proof text.

"It is not helpful for a 'liberal' or revisionist case, since the whole point of Paul's rhetorical gambit is that everyone in his imagined readership agrees in thinking the same sex relations of the culture around them to be as obviously immoral as idol-worship or disobedience to parents.

It is not very helpful to the conservative either, though, because Paul insists on shifting the focus away from the objects of moral disapprobation in chapter 1 to the reading / hearing subject who has at this point been happily identifying with Paul's castigation of someone else ... Paul is making a primary point not about homosexuality but about the delusions of the supposedly law-abiding. "

Christians cannot pick and choose amongst the texts of scripture, he concluded; the whole of the Bible needed to be understood both as inspired and inspiring - the work of the Holy Spirit:

"It is the spirit that connects the periods of God's communicative action towards humanity and thus connects the diverse texts that make up the one manifold text that we call Holy Scripture. The Spirit's work as 'breathing' God's wisdom into the text of Scripture is not a magical process that removes biblical writing from the realm of actual human writing; it is the work of creating one 'movement' out of the diverse historical narratives and textual deposits that represent Israel's and the Church's efforts to find words to communicate God's communication of summons and invitation.

"The Spirit through the events of God's initiative stirs up the words and makes sense of them for the reader/hearer in the Spirit-sustained community.

As Karl Barth insisted, this leaves no ground for breaking up Scripture into the parts we can 'approve' as God-inspired and the parts that are merely human; the whole is human and the whole is offered by God in and through the life of the body; always shaping and determining the form of that life. "

The full text of the Archbishop's lecture can be found at:

http://www.anglican.ca/news/news.php?newsItem=2007-04-16_abc.news