

The Bible Says

Next time you hear people saying, as they do quite frequently, and with surprising confidence on almost any issue, "The Bible says ...", it is always a good idea to ask, "But does it?"

Lately a female opponent of women bishops was asserting robustly, and without leaving room for dissent, that "the Bible reserves authority to men", and a young man was expressing his view on homosexual relations by saying, "I have been reading my Bible, and it is clear to me that God forbids homosexual relations". Leaving aside the tricky question of what precisely "the Bible says" in the tiny number of passages that might be taken to deal with the question, what he was saying was that he disapproved of homosexual relationships and was able to find a verse in Scripture, taken out of context that he would claim meant what he wanted the Bible to mean. Perhaps that is something many of us are inclined to do with issues that are in dispute.

This is rather a disrespectful approach to the Scriptures, insensitive to its nuances and subtleties. Certainly we should read the Bible, but our reading must be informed by a silent humility in the face of its mystery, a two-fold attentiveness. For, first, the "Good Book" is not a book at all, in the sense of being a single text; it is, rather, a library of texts, each offering different points of view. Or, to use a different metaphor, it is an orchestra—and-choir with many different sounds, from which God (as conductor) aims to produce a perfect harmony. If you concentrate on one particular instrument you will not hear the divinely intended sound of the whole.

Secondly we must listen out for what is being said by God, whose word lurks just below the surface of the text. For God's voice is there in the Bible, make no mistake, but its mark is that of an undying freshness. Our task is to approach the text with a docile heart, ready to be surprised by the unexpectedness of God. We are being insensitive if we come to it already certain that we "know the answer".

For the odd thing is that the Bible does not give us easy and comfortable answers to the questions we put to it. We naturally think that the family is "a good thing" (as indeed it is), and therefore we tend to read what politicians call "family values" into the text. In fact, however, the Bible says remarkably little explicitly about family, and what it does say is not as comfortable as we might wish.

In the Old Testament we notice Abraham's obedience when commanded to sacrifice his son but he doesn't appear to consult his wife on the matter. It is not so much family as tribal values that are trumpeted in Psalms 127 and 128. In Psalm 127, it is "sons" who are "an inheritance from the Lord ... like arrows in the hand of a warrior". And why is this? Because their father "will not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate". It is simply a matter of status in society. Similarly when Psalm 128 sings of family values, it is that "your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children like olive-shoots around your table". In other words, a wife and a large brood of children are the trappings of a successful life style.

The New Testament offers a very different tone, of course; but we should notice that Jesus does alarming things to "family values". He implicitly snubs Joseph (Luke 2:48-49) and claims to be creating divisions in families (Matthew 10: 35-37). But is he not crystal clear on the issue of divorce? Look at the context. Some influential rabbis taught that a man could divorce his wife for any reason at all. The matter was hotly disputed and the Pharisees are trying to trap Jesus. Jesus in his response is defending women against male promiscuity and abuse.

What can we learn, then, from the Bible about "family values"? Let me offer three suggestions drawn from the biblical texts upon which we might build our moral thinking. Our sexuality is too precious and too dangerous a gift to be used promiscuously in our own self-interest. We must take note of and imitate Jesus' openness to God's ever-fresh word and his opposition to legalism and lifeless rigidity. And, finally, we should continue to ask ourselves what the unchanging and ever faithful God is saying to us.