

The Good Book - Diverse

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[0 : 0 0] We are in week three of this series, as Keith was saying, that we've been doing called The Good Book, where we're exploring the Bible and how we might read it. If you've been here or you caught up online, you'll realize that we're looking at the Bible, not with the stories and the characters and so on so much, but really looking at the Bible as a book.

Because as we've hopefully seen over a couple of weeks that we've had and will do today, it is both a brilliant and a baffling book to get our heads around, some would say in equal measure.

In week one, I suggested, if you recall, that because the Bible isn't a clear-cut manual for life, we'd be better off approaching it as a book of wisdom, which is designed to get us not only thinking, but to deepen our relationship with God in order to make sense of what the Bible says, particularly when parts of the Bible seem to be deliberately ambiguous or contradict themselves.

Last week, we explored what it might be meant when we say that the Bible is inspired. The Bible is inspired. And we unpacked perhaps that that's not that it's been dictated by God indeed.

It seems to have some errors or some judgments in it. But instead, God breathes life into the Bible's very human words.

[1 : 2 4] It's the breath of God, the Holy Spirit, who enables us to interpret and apply its words for our own time and place. So wisdom and inspired.

And this week, what I'd like us to consider is how diverse the Bible is, both in terms of the language that's contained in it and the variety of people who contributed to it.

But most importantly, I think, how these different writers often had very different ways of understanding who God is and how he relates to us.

So that's going to be key for us today. In fact, I'll be key for us today.

With the children who come there each week. Most of the kids that come to that group on a Friday is the year 3, 4, 5 and 6 group. They're not particularly a churchy bunch of kids. So it's great they come.

[2 : 4 5] But they were asked recently if they could draw a picture which reflected their idea of who Jesus is. In many ways, it's the same kind of thing we're asking perhaps to explore this morning.

They were asked for their understanding of who God is and how he relates to us in the form of a picture. And so I'll show you a few of them.

Because we had a lot of smiley looking Jesuses like this one, which has got a touch of the sort of twits and Quentin Blake around him, I would have thought, with that one. You've got another one here, the Jesus with the big hands, which was a nice thought.

Perhaps a huggy kind of Jesus there. You had big bearded, long-haired Jesuses that some of them pointed out. But for me, I think that looks like Billy Connolly myself.

So separated at birth, maybe. Equally, you had another smiling and should we say more densely bearded Jesus.

[3 : 44] Although if the last one was Billy Connolly, I'm showing my age here. But this one reminds me of Barry Gibb from the Bee Gees as well. Others, though, they didn't just go with the pictures. They added words as well.

So they saw Jesus, perhaps this person did, as being brave and kind and good. Brave and kind. If they're the first two words which come to someone's mind when they think about Jesus, that's an interesting combination of things to think what that looks like in practice.

This one, for example, I liked when they said that Jesus is heroic and brave and fearless and not scared of heights as well. Which is useful when you think about the ascension, I suppose.

We had this one here. So they went to town on a description, sort of words, and a nice developing picture timeline of Jesus in Mary's tummy to baby Jesus, all the way through to, in their eyes, old man Jesus with a stick and so on at the end.

So that's another interesting way to think about it. And then, again, with the words. This one was interesting. Brave, strong and kind. Again, happy smile. Kind and gentle. And at the bottom there on the right, it says, Feet that won't kick.

[4 : 57] Which is a nice way to think, perhaps, of Jesus being the peace lover that he was. And then on the left there, I don't know if you can read that writing, but this person pictured Jesus as having in their hand a lolly for someone as well.

Which is, again, a very nice way of thinking of Jesus' hospitality and generosity and so on. I like that one. And then finally, there was this one which stuck out, which I think is actually pretty profound.

They pictured Jesus as a homeless person. I'm so homeless, it says. On the left there. And then on Jesus' top, it's written, Pray for me. Which, again, I think speaks volumes if that's their perception of who Jesus is.

Because it reminds us, I think, and the person drawing this may not have put the two together, but it reminds us of the time that Jesus says we're able to see him and we're able to serve him when we provide for those in need.

So in some deep way, this child is associating Jesus with those in need. And I think that's pretty profound there. So it's an interesting, in many ways encouraging batch of images displaying the various ways in which some of YPC2, again, these years, three, four, five, and six kids, understand and picture Jesus.

[6 : 07] And so with these perhaps in mind, just a few questions for us to keep in mind today along similar lines. Because how do we, how do you picture or understand God?

What comes to mind if you said, what do you think of God? How do you picture him? How do you understand him? What kind of words would you use? How would you say we're to relate to him?

I don't know what you'd say if you were given a piece of paper and a few felt pens. I don't know what answers you'd come up with. We'll come back to those questions later, but keep those at the back of your mind as we go through.

But for now, let's get stuck in to the third week of this series that we're doing on the good book. Because although we used to call in the Bible a book, it's not actually a book at all.

Rather, it's made up of 66 little books. It's a collection of little books, all bound up in one big book, a compendium if you like, which we call the Bible. Indeed, the word Bible literally means books, plural.

[7 : 13] So that's acknowledged in what we call it. Because the Bible is really a library of books. It's, hence the background to our title slide we've been using. Again, it's this idea of having a shelf of different books which we handily carry about in one bound version, which has got 39 books in the Old Testament and 27 books in the New Testament.

But if it is a library, as with any decent library, it contains a whole range of styles of writing. Writing which can be grouped in the Bible into what we might call different literary genres, such as history, or wisdom, law, prophecy, and so on.

It contains apocalyptic literature. Books like Daniel, or Revelation, which reveal a picture of what will happen when time, as we know it, comes to an end. And brace yourselves for this, because it even contains erotic poetry as well in the Bible.

Everyone looks down at this point. Okay, you've got books like Song of Songs, or Song of Solomon, it's called. And I don't know if you've ever read this book, it's quite a short one, but I figured for one of our main Bible readings this morning, we'll have a little snippet from the Song of Solomon, the Song of Songs.

So here's a little taster of the kind of things which are in the Bible in this particular book. It says this, Now, admittedly, some of this maybe hasn't happened, Now, admittedly, some of this maybe hasn't lasted through the translation and the generations and stuff.

[9 : 01] We may not want our teeth compared to a flock of sheep, even if they have been recently shorn. And we won't dwell on the gazelles this morning. But this kind of passage is an indication that when we read the Bible, we are encountering hugely diverse styles of writing, you know, covering anything from celebration of love and sex in this book, to heartfelt advice on how to pray.

Not only that, but the 66 books which make up the Bible, they're also hugely diverse in terms of the time in which the stories were assembled and put together.

You know, there are at least a thousand years from the first written accounts which appear in the Bible to the latest. A thousand years. That's an enormous amount of time in which to try and find some sort of cohesion between all the different writers and the time periods which the writings reflect.

I mean, think about it. A thousand years. I can't even begin to imagine what the world will be like in the year 3000. Busted told us not much has changed, but they live underwater. I don't know if that's going to be true or not.

But in the year 3000, who knows what the world will be like? But that's the kind of time scale we're looking at. From here to there is the breadth of time in which the writings of the Bible were put together.

[10 : 24] And that's not even taking into account what we might call the oral history. You know, the spoken stories which are handed down to generations long before they were ever committed to parchment.

Now, the Bible is an ancient book or ancient selection of books. It's a diverse book in which dozens and dozens of different people wrote versions and had their voice expressed about the events which took place over the centuries.

And yet more than it just being a sort of disjointed compilation, if you like, of history and law and erotic poetry and so on. The writer and speaker, Rob Bell, he puts it like this when he talks about the Bible.

He says, the Bible is a library of books reflecting how human beings have understood the divine. So that again, the Bible is a library of books reflecting how human beings have understood the divine.

That's going to be key for what we're exploring this morning because the diversity found in the Bible helps us to discover, I think, the way in which people's views and understanding of God has differed and how it has developed over time.

[11 : 43] And he literally, from the word go in the Bible, there are very diverse views being expressed by the writers about who God is and what he's like.

So, for example, if we start at the beginning, as we often do in Genesis, this begins famously, you might know, with the creation stories of how the world was formed.

And so the first verse, Genesis 1-1, begins with this famous words. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Familiar words, perhaps, as I say.

And yet it's the word God in this verse, which it would be good to unpack a little bit, because in the original Hebrew language in which the book of Genesis was written, the word we translate here as God is an old Hebrew word, which is this one.

Elohim. Elohim. You need a bit of a kind of huck sound in that. So you know what we're going to do. You know you like to speak a bit of Greek and Hebrew and stuff. So after three, let's say Elohim.

[12 : 46] But if you can get a kind of bit of a greenie going, that will help things. All right. So that will help the Hebrew flow. Okay, so Elohim. After three. One, two, three. Elohim. Excellent.

And now swallow. Again, there we go. Excellent. Elohim. Elohim. Now, that's the word which we translate as God. Far, though, from being a special word for the God who is revealed in the Bible, Elohim was actually a very general word that ancient people of all sorts of cultures and beliefs used to describe a God or the gods.

Elohim, therefore, it's not a name of God. Rather, it's simply a generic way of speaking about the divine.

There's actually nothing special about the word Elohim. In fact, it's quite an impersonal way to think about God. It's a bit like calling someone these days like sir or madam or something.

You know, it's respectful. Yeah, it's deferential even. But it lacks a bit of precision and focus about who they really are. That's the word that we use for God in the first verse in the Bible.

[14 : 07] Elohim. Way of describing God. But then when we go to the next chapter along, we get another different and in some ways pretty conflicting creation story.

This story isn't concerned so much with the six days of creation or the universe as a whole, but instead involves a garden in a place called Eden and a man and a woman who we later learn are called Adam and Eve.

And yet in the second creation story, this one in Genesis 2, The word that's used for God is this one. We translate it as this one.

It says, The Lord God made the earth and the heavens. And the Hebrew word which we translate as Lord God here is a completely different Hebrew term than is found just a chapter earlier in Genesis 1.

It's not Elohim in this verse. Rather, it's this word. Four Hebrew letters which are pronounced Yod-ho-va-hey.

[15 : 17] Yod-ho-va-hey. A word which we tend to anglicize a little bit and call it Yahweh. Yahweh. Who is this God? Yahweh or Jehovah as we sometimes say?

Well, as you may well know, Yahweh is not a noun like Elohim, but it's a name. It's a name. It's God's name, which he himself revealed to Moses.

And we're not quite sure, but it means, as we're saying, something like I am who I am or I will be what I will be. And yet importantly, and in contrast to Elohim, which is the word used for God in Genesis 1, Yahweh is a very personal, intimate way of describing God.

Now, why might this be significant? You've got Elohim in Genesis 1 and Yahweh in Genesis 2. Well, what's fascinating, I think, is to compare the different ways that the different creation stories in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 picture God as being.

So in Genesis 1, just to go back to that verse, the one that says God Elohim created the heavens and the earth. In this story in Genesis 1, if you read it with fresh eyes, God seems to be quite a sort of distant deity.

[16 : 37] He's this kind of cosmic God who is portrayed as the transcendent controller of all things, like an air traffic controller or something.

It's the heavens, if you see, which are named first in the opening verse. Then the earth. Elohim created the heavens and the earth. And that maybe gives us a hint as to a sense of Elohim's priorities.

He's mighty and mysterious and above all things. Powerful creator, yeah. Someone who brings order out of chaos, yeah. But he's not in Genesis 1 necessarily a personal kind of God who we relate to.

That's the picture in Genesis 1. But compare that with who we see revealed in Genesis 2, where God has the name Yahweh. And he created, we're told, the earth and the heavens.

It's the other way round. God is portrayed in Genesis 2 as a much more personal way. So creation is not so much about the stars and space and so on, but instead the focus is on the earth, hence the order in which they're spoken.

[17 : 47] But even more specific than that, it's not simply about the earth. The focus is on this beautiful garden on the earth in which God, as Yahweh, we're told, breathes life into the nostrils of a man he's made out of the dust.

You know, it's a very sort of hands-on type of interaction. Yahweh speaks to the man. He takes a rib from the man's side to make a suitable companion in the shape of a woman for him.

Yahweh is even described as walking in the garden in the cool of the day. It's a completely different picture of who the divine is when compared with that found in Genesis 1.

God in Genesis 1 is this nameless, almighty, cosmic creator. Whereas just one chapter later in Genesis 2, he's a named, intimate, personal cultivator, if you like.

Now, which of these two? Elohim in Genesis 1, Yahweh in Genesis 2, which is, should we say, the more accurate picture of who God is?

[19 : 01] Well, they're both true. They're both true. God is both cosmic, but he's also close. But perhaps the more interesting question to ask is not which of these is preferable, but why?

Why are there these two contrasting pictures of God within the first two chapters of the Bible? And the answer, I would say, is because Genesis 1 and 2 are written by two completely different people with very different backgrounds, very different ideas, very different understandings about who God is, and therefore very different priorities about what they wanted to communicate about his nature.

In fact, we go back to that Rob Bell quote, this one, that the Bible is a library of books reflecting how human beings have understood the divine.

That's a truth, I would say, that is borne out in the opening chapters of the very first book in this library. Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 represent two different ways in which two different human beings have understood the divine.

One as this cosmic being, one as this very close being. And what I get overly excited, I think, I find this more fun than perhaps I should, my geeky side coming out, but what I find fun is that you can continue to trace these different ways of understanding God all the way through Genesis and into Exodus and beyond.

[20 : 45] In fact, when we look at the different kind of language that's used, the various styles of writing that's taken up, the subjects that writers choose to deal with and so on, scholars reckon that there are at least four main writers of these opening books of the Bible, all skillfully, but at times obviously woven and edited together by someone else at a later date.

So if we go a little bit further on in Genesis, let's take the story of the flood and Noah's Ark, for example, found in Genesis chapters 6 to 9. A very clever editor, probably a guy called Ezra, who we meet a bit later on in the Bible, he's woven two accounts, two versions of the flood story from two different writers together.

One writer, in one version of this flood story, calls God, again, Elohim. The other one, the other writer, continues to call God Yahweh.

But they've been, it's a mash-up, they've been put together, if you like, by the editor to make one coherent flood story. Even in the space of one verse though, you can see where the joins are.

Because you get God called different things when the words are combined. So for example, Genesis 7.16, it says this, the animals were going in to the ark, the animals going in were male and female of every living thing, as God, the word used is Elohim, had commanded Noah.

[22 : 22] Then, the Lord, Yahweh, shut Noah in. It's quite strange to have those two things side by side, because there have been two different stories, which have been edited together, to make a continuous flow.

Also though, what's fascinating, I think, in the flood story, is that it's Yahweh, you know, this personal, intimate portrayal of God, who is described in this kind of way in the story.

The Lord, Yahweh, was grieved, that he had made human beings, and his heart was filled, with pain. It's a very sort of vulnerable, emotional portrayal, or understanding of who God is.

That's the Yahweh portrayal of God. Contrast though, when we look at Elohim parts in the story, this more impersonal, kind of cosmic portrayal of God, seems to have none of this kind of inner wrestling, inner anguish going on.

And instead, it's much more matter of fact. So we read things like this. So God, Elohim, said to Noah, I'm going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth.

[23 : 40] Very different kind of feel. Very different kind of tone, to how God might be feeling at this time. And if you want a bit of homework for today, and I know you do, then when you go home, read the flood story, Genesis 6, 7, 8, 9, and make a note of the differences in the way, the Lord, Yahweh, and how God, Elohim, is portrayed.

In our English translation, sometimes it says God, sometimes it says the Lord, and you can detect which of these two versions say what. Have a look and see what kind of God is revealed in these different sentences, with these different ways of describing God.

Because it's a story which contains two different writers, with two very different perspectives on who God is. Same is true of all sorts of other books though, in the Bible as well.

So the Psalms, they have a variety of authors. Scholars reckon anywhere between perhaps seven and fifty people wrote the 150 Psalms.

So it's no wonder with that number of people all having a tuppence worth in the book, it's no wonder that some Psalms portray God as like a loving shepherd, and then other Psalms portray God as this violent warrior, because they're written by different people, with very different understandings of what God is like.

[25 : 08] And as we were saying last week, perhaps one of our jobs is to work out which understanding of God, as revealed in a different Psalm, will be closer to the truth of who God is than others.

I think we know this diversity stuff, because we have different accounts. The Gospels, you know, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, they're four versions of Jesus' life, which were put together by different writers, different editors, who each had different priorities about what they thought was most important and needed to be said about Jesus.

So, for example, perhaps most obviously, only Matthew and Luke mentioned Jesus' birth. Mark and John don't bother at all, presumably because Mark and John didn't think Jesus' birth was of the utmost importance.

It didn't need talking about. Now, for us, I imagine we're glad that Matthew and Luke did mention about Jesus' birth, because it really helps our understanding of who Jesus is, and it gives us Christmas.

Without Matthew and Luke, we wouldn't have Christmas, and most importantly, we wouldn't have pigs in blankets, which I doubt was on their mind at the time, but that matters to me. See, while I think we'd be wise to digest this principle, that the Bible as a whole is written by a diverse array of writers, each with their own different perspectives on God, that may be true, but I think it probably prompts the question, how do we know which biblical writers get closest to the heart of who God is?

[26 : 46] How do we know which biblical writers, which books of the Bible, which parts of which books in the Bible get closest to the heart of who God is? You see, as a starter, I'd say that's where praying comes in.

That's where reading the Bible with other people comes in, because when we pray it through, when we talk it through, when we ask God to give us wisdom in our reading, you know, we get more insight.

The Bible is designed to be questioned and wrestled with. I think that's why the editors didn't get rid of these clues that are in there where God is called different things, because they want us to notice that.

They want us to see, well, hang on a minute, who wrote that? Who wrote that bit? Why did they call God Elohim? Why did they call God Yahweh? What was their thinking about? And then we can engage and enter into that kind of story much more fully ourselves and weigh things up about our views of God ourselves.

But ultimately, I would say, and we'll talk about this more in the coming couple of weeks, I'd say we get closer to the heart of who God is by comparing what the various biblical writers' understanding of God are with who we know God is through what we see of him in Jesus.

[28 : 06] Jesus is the glasses, if you like, that we read the Bible through. He's the lens through which everything else comes into focus. Now, we find out about Jesus from those gospel stories, yeah, but also, indeed, primarily, I would say, we find out about Jesus through our own spirit-led relationship with him.

And if that's true, we do find out most about Jesus directly in our relationship with him. That puts an awful lot of importance on the need for us to be in that ongoing personal connection, personal relationship, if you like, with God.

Because without that, we're going to be led and pulled all over the place in what we think and believe. Indeed, just thinking of this, the writer, Richard Rohr, he talks about our understanding of God as being like a tricycle, where our experience of God is the front wheel of that tricycle.

But our experience at the front is backed up, Richard Rohr says, by both the Bible and what he calls tradition, the way Christians over the centuries have also interpreted and experienced and wrestled with their understanding of God.

Now, we might look at that and think, well, hang on a minute, we can't trust our experience, we can't trust our feelings. That's the kind of very post-post-modern way of thinking, you can't trust your feelings, don't rely on those at all.

[29 : 39] But actually, I think, even though we might often dismiss our experience and feelings as being unreliable, or it's the Bible first and then our experience, I think I agree with this model of a tricycle way of understanding.

Because our experience has to be the key way in which we understand and relate to God, as otherwise we'll be driven by religion and tradition rather than relationship.

And if our experience is key, that honors the fact that God has made his home with us, first in person, in the flesh, through Jesus, and now in our lives, through the Spirit.

It makes the Spirit all important, which is right, because the Spirit is God. If God thought our experience was too risky to trust, the way of giving us an insight into him, I don't think he would come and make his home with us in such a close and intimate way.

All of which, perhaps, leads us back to where we started with those questions I posed earlier. How do you understand God? In other words, what's your experience of him?

[30 : 53] How would you describe him? How would you say you relate to him? Just have a think about these three questions.

If you're a picture kind of person, you were handed a bit of paper and some felt pens, what would you draw? What would you write? How do you understand God? How would you describe him?

And how would you say you relate to him? See, I'd say that the diversity of the Bible and the different ways in which his writers understood God, that gives us immense permission to be different and to wrestle with, with God's help, our understanding of who God is.

To work out our own understanding of how we are to relate to him today. Indeed, I'd say it's through acknowledging our struggles with the Bible, exploring the various views its writers hold and working out our own response to their understanding.

That our appreciation of the Bible as this ancient, diverse library of books which God brings to life by his breath, I think our appreciation of it will grow.

[32 : 13] So I'll leave these questions up for a bit. But I would, I just want to finish really by saying, as we seek to grow in our understanding of God and the way that the Bible portrays him, then our relationship with him and with each other will deepen and develop as the Spirit leads.

And so my prayer for myself, for each of us, is that God will continue to shape and transform us so that we may be thoroughly equipped for every good work because of our relationship with him.

Amen.