

They were the best of times, they were the worst of times. I'm sure I've heard that somewhere before...

The best of times, the worst of times: it all depends on where you were at the time, what you were doing, who you were doing it with or who was doing it to you. Take the 1970s... if you spent that decade as a child, a teenager, an adult or not yet born; in Leeds, in London, in Beijing or Boston; if you were male, female, gay, straight, black, white or brown all will have determined whether the decade that taste forgot was the best or the worst.

The past is the golden hearth of home or it is a foreign country: it depends what you value and whether you think it was present or missing back then or now, as to how closely you nestle down with nostalgia.

We know that if we move around the world the spoken language changes. So it is as well if we stay put geographically but move around in time. Roll back the years and we will find that people speak in deceptively different tongues: centuries apart, separated by a common language. How we speak, what we say, what we talk about. Each time has its own concerns, and each generation, and each culture. That they are not always the same gives us generation gaps and teenage rebellions; reaction and revolution, evolution and rearguard action. Each age and culture speaks in its own tongue about its own concerns. When the Carews next door were in the dog days of their carousing upper class England hadn't heard of hard-hat health and safety but was obsessively concerned that your cap was made from a material suitable for your place in life: check out sumptuary laws if that sounds too ridiculous for words. When Bess was busying herself with Walter's head the age of consent was 12 and foreigners literally ruled the country: back then the moral panic *du jour* was witches and Roman Catholics. Each age, each culture speaks in its own unique voice about its own concerns, concerns which we may share or concerns which will seem to us entirely inexplicable. Much of what obsessed our ancestors has withered on the vine of time or shrivelled under the scientific gaze or just been carried away by the capricious winds of fashion. Each age, each culture speaks in its own unique voice about its own concerns

It is inevitable that in different times and different places these will be different things; they can only not be if the world never changes, never has changed and never will. The pioneers in any endeavour will not have the same concerns of those who come several hundred years later. Pioneers will be concerned with basic survival,

Bear Grylls meeting immediate needs which will have the rough-hewn immediacy of those at the cutting edge. Those who come after will not. Pioneers might clear trees to make space for houses and fields: this doesn't mean their more settled successors should keep swinging the axes until they run out of trees. A community at different stages of its growth will have different needs, and sometimes opposed ones: there may come a point where the need is to plant trees rather than to fell them. Such is also the case with the community of faith, that community built of countless generations in a myriad of places.

As with everything else, each age, each culture speaks about God in its own unique voice. True it will learn from past ages, listen to others experiences and use those to help build its picture of the divine, but ultimately each time and place will speak of God in its own distinct voice, with concerns and illustrations about what it means to be God's people drawn from what they see around them, what is in their lives; talking about what it is that most concerns them, what is important to them, there and then.

So, sometimes we will read in the Bible something that will jar, something that will grind and clank to our contemporary ears, the gears not quite catching or rattling away like a spanner dropped straight into the motor. When we hear that cacophony we will have two choices. We can deny the present and try to re tune our ears to a bronze age frequency, or we can rethink our response to something that has long been there in our faith or in our scriptures that is now sounds hopelessly discordant. No surprises, I think the latter approach is the one to take.

There is, let's us be up front about this, lots of highly offensive stuff in our Bibles- treatment of women, treatment of children, treatment of foreigners, slaves, minorities, transgressors. There's all that stuff that we know if we did it or said it would be just plain wrong but because it's in the Bible we sort of don't think it is. The temptation is to skip over the inconvenient stuff- all Christian traditions do this and that's an appropriate response as long as we are not pretending that that stuff isn't offensive, isn't written in the Bible, and the scripture writers didn't say it. It's there and they did say it, but we can acknowledge that those were different times *and* they wouldn't say it now. As St Paul himself said, when you were a child you spoke like a child, you thought like a child; when you are an adult... time to be the grown up in the room. Revelation is ongoing, evolving, developing, maturing. Christianity is not stuck in Jerusalem 33 AD- we have grown up. Of course you can still see the child in the woman, but my, how she has changed.

Not only were cultures different when Paul was writing, but St Paul's concerns were different: he was concerned for the growth of his faith in the 1st Century: concerned that the tenderest of church shoots should grow and survive. He was concerned not to offend the conventions of his time except with matters theological. So St Paul (as we heard in our reading this morning) spent much of his time and energy refuting the claims of other Christians that Gentile converts had to follow the Jewish law. Vitally important to Paul then: not an issue to us now. Paul devotes large chunks of his letters to considering whether Christians should eat meat sacrificed to idols. Vitally important to Paul then: not an issue to us now. When Paul bangs on about women, sexual minorities and so on, it's not because to him those issues were essential matters of the faith. For him they were *inessential* matters that were getting in the way of the faith. If society expected women to take a subordinate back seat, so Paul would argue, don't put a woman up the front. If society praised people for staying sober, don't get drunk. If society tutted at sexual excess- and despite everything Frankie Howerd & Up Pompeii you always thought you knew about the Romans, Roman Society was immensely prudish, if society tutted then be straight as a die. Because nobody can hear the message you're trying to give if you're speaking in a bizarre accent or wearing outlandish clothes.

And. That's *all* it's about. At no point does Paul or Jesus or any other NT writer sit down and exposit at length on gender roles or sexual orientation or complementarity, which, trust me, they would have if it had mattered, really mattered to matters of faith. They didn't sit down and systematically write the rules for gender relations and sexual orientation for all ages to come. All the stuff which Christians fight about, all those concerns which have meant we have inflicted so much pain and hurt and sorrow on our brothers and sisters over the centuries are not New Testament concerns. The fact that you have to scrape around, really scrape around to find anything vaguely pertinent to our current culture wars and then twist it to fit, tells us not.

However, all is not lost in translation. While there are vast chunks of the scriptures that are specific to time and place you don't have to bend anything out of shape when you find talk about what God is like, or forgiveness, or how to treat the poor and vulnerable.

It can take a bit of work to filter out the signal from the noise. There are no guarantees of success. We run the risk that we will end up cherry picking the Bible-

ignoring something we don't like or emphasising something someone else doesn't like but that doesn't affect us. All Christians do it, perhaps because the thing about cherry trees is, you can't eat the branches but you can eat the fruit.

There are no guarantees. But if we don't treat the Bible as a product of particular people in particular times and particular places then we are not treating it with respect, and we are lying to ourselves for the sake of a false clarity of faith. The New Testament writers were blithe about the institution of slavery. That was then, we know that cannot be now.

So. Listen to what the Scriptures say to your heart. Don't sweat the small stuff. Try to translate from the 'then' to the 'now' but always treat any claim to a definitive translation with caution. Be aware that whenever we pick up a Bible in English, then someone else has already tried both the linguistic and the historical translation for us and what they've produced might be helpful and it might be not. Personally, I'd be wary of any Bible translation that uses words and concepts that would be entirely alien to the original writers - it's a surprisingly common occurrence.

And finally, here I go again, test everything you read in the Bible against the touchstone of love. If what you read there seems harsh or grating or cruel, then perhaps, just perhaps though the words may be an accurate linguistic rendition, but taken out of time and place, just perhaps, God has been lost in translation. But if what you read there speaks to your heart of love then, just perhaps, you have finally found the very words of God.