

LEFT-HANDEDNESS

Judges 3: 12-30 and John 12: 1-8

I've recently been converted. "About time too", I hear you say. However, I'm not referring to Christianity itself, but converted to the merits of the Methodist Recorder. It's not perfect, of course, but it is an important contributor to the cohesion of British Methodism. If you don't already subscribe, I'd recommend that you do: it's a good weekly read. The Recorder carries a wide range of news, opinions, book reviews, obituaries etc – an eclectic mix of the global and the parochial, but there's always plenty to get you thinking. This morning I'd like to pick out some items from last week's Recorder to be considered in light of today's scripture readings.

Let's start with Ehud. I once had a girlfriend who claimed this to be among her favourite scripture passages. I don't think she had a fetish for daggers stuck in the bowels of fat kings; I think she was really just marveling at the variety of texts within the Bible, and suggesting that we needed to have a concept of scripture sufficiently broad as to include this gory and satirical tale as well as all the beautiful and inspiring passages that we normally read. That's quite a challenge as it is hard, at this remove, to see the spiritual significance of Ehud.

What attracted me to the story again this morning was an article by the President of Methodist Conference in last week's Recorder (at which time, coincidentally, he was in Scotland). It concerned his father, and he said that:

as a little boy he was made to write with his right hand though he was clearly left-handed. The echo even today of words in the English language such as "sin" and "sinister" from the Latin and "gauche" from the French, reminds of a time when to be left-handed was simply wrong. They even tied children's hands behind their backs to make them conform.

I was intrigued. Where does it come from, this sense that God abhors left-handedness? The only example I could think of was Ehud, who Judges deliberately tells us was a left-handed man. I consulted a concordance: the only other biblical reference to left-handedness is an incidental comment concerning a group of warriors from Benjamin's tribe later in the book of Judges. Nowhere else in the Bible is left-handedness even mentioned.

Could it be that Ehud himself has given the left-handed such a bad name? Well, I have to say that he is not the most appealing character in the Bible, but he is presented in the Book of Judges as a good man, whose scheming and aggression is said to reflect God's will. To understand this fully we need to appreciate that Israel at that time was set apart from other nations, from heathen nations, by not having a king. Go alone was their King. Some puritans might seek the same in our day: we won't obey a king or a queen, a pope or a president ... we will just do the will of God. The problem, as the people of Israel found out, is that they lurched between periods of good and bad judges (think of kings without the crown).

This story of Ehud is all that we know about him, but we are told that after Ehud's triumph, "the land was at peace for 80 years", and both just before and just after this story we are told that "Israel did what was wrong in the eyes of the Lord". In other words, the years of Ehud coincided with years of peace and prosperity – this Ehud was seen as a good man.

Ehud's lefthandedness is also portrayed as an advantage that he uses in doing God's will. Normally a right-handed man would keep his sword on the left side of his waist, ready to be drawn when required. If the King's staff had any suspicion about Ehud they would have

checked to see if there was a sword at his left hip, but they may not have checked the right-hand side. Similarly, when Ehud drew the sword with his left hand there would have been a greater element of surprise. Being left-handed was part of the advantage God have given him.

On this evidence the Bible, if anything, presents lefthandedness as a blessing. But despite this, the Church has traditionally considered it sinister and, right up to the present generation, has tried to force people to act right-handed. As Mark Wakelin wryly observes: “we’ve nothing against people being left-handed as long as they don’t act left-handed”.

Such a comment sounds familiar, and a moment’s thought should be sufficient to recall the context in which it is frequently applied these days – to sexual inclinations. It’s OK to be homosexual, but not to practise homosexuality; it’s OK to be attracted to a person other than one’s spouse but not to have an extra-marital affair; it’s OK to have a relationship before marriage but not to have pre-marital sex. Such is the teaching of the church, some would say to obsession.

Which brings me to a second article in last week’s Methodist Recorder. A survey of attitudes amongst Methodist Christians found out that:

- 68% said they would feel guilty about an extra-marital affair
- 24% said they would feel guilty about pre-marital sex
- 27% said they would feel guilty about the use of pornography in sexual stimulation.

This leaves rather a large number of Methodists who disagree with traditional church teaching on one or more of these issues. The survey concludes that:

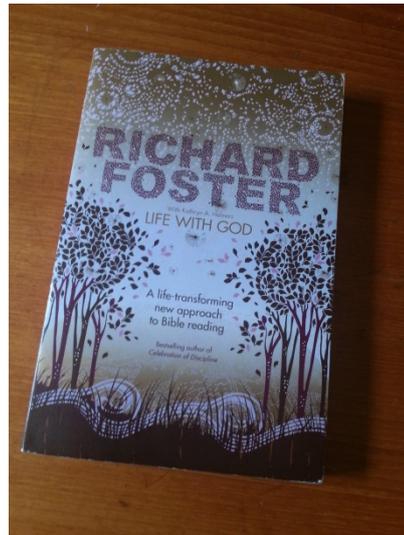
54% of Methodists rely most on their own reason, judgment and intuition in making decisions, with only 6% saying that they rely most on the teachings of their religion.

Which, to say the least, is interesting. But equally it is not surprising when you consider for how long and how far off-beam has been the church’s tradition on left-handedness. And it is just the same, with rather more serious consequences, with sexuality.

Read any commentary on the story of Ehud and you will be told about the sexual allegory that underpins it. Some of it depends on subtle word-play in the Hebrew and we needn’t go into that here. Much more obvious is the sexual overtone to the episode of Mary lavishing expensive perfume on Jesus’ feet (the word for which in Hebrew is a euphemism for the male genitalia) then drying them with her hair. But just as Ehud gets a good press in Judges, so too Jesus goes out of his way to praise Mary for her actions, even to the extent that he appears in the process to be dismissive of the poor.

So here are two Bible stories, complete with sexual imagery and allusion, and in both cases the protagonists are deemed acceptable to God; even more than that, they are said to be acting as God’s agents. No qualms about sexuality here then; indeed much of the Bible (though not the bits we usually hear read in church) is full of stories of sex in all its forms, and rarely is it critical of what goes on unless there is exploitation and violence involved. The Bible is not squeamish about sex; it is just the Christian church that seems to be.

So in a week when a new Pope has been elected, promising to uphold these “traditional church values” come what may, where does that leave us? It so happens that the book I have been reading for Lent is called “Life With God: a life-transforming new approach to bible reading”.



Now I don't want to take issue with author Richard Foster (a person so important that his font size is three times that of God!) but truly there is nothing new in this book. That doesn't make it pointless, however, because what it does is to call each of us, each and every Christian, back to the Bible. It is what Martin Luther called *sola scriptura* – by scripture alone – and it is the principle that each of us reading, marking, learning and inwardly digesting the Word of God; each of us conversing with it from our own situation; each of us asking our questions of it and waiting patiently for God to answer through it: **THAT IS ALL WE NEED**. The Spirit of God breathes through these words and speaks to the Spirit that is within us. No more, no less; that is our salvation.

And so with my girlfriend of old I revel in the non-conformity of Ehad; with 94% of Methodist people today I too won't be bound by church teachings; with Mary with her expensive perfumes and her sensual acts I glory in the fullness of being human and being alive; and I will do all this safe in the knowledge that God's love, God's grace is so, so much bigger than all of this. Whatever our handedness, whatever our sexuality, whatever our theology or our understanding of what it means to call scripture the Word of God – we simply need to engage with it, openly and honestly, that we may forever be changed by it into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

Armadale, 17th March 2013