

77 A growing understanding

Walking along a path this week with our rising-two grandson, Zac, we pointed out his shadow, and got him to wave – and the shadow waved back! As he gets a bit older, he'll probably then think that his shadow is 'attached' – however fast he runs, he can't get away. As he continues to grow in understanding, he'll realise that his shadow isn't a 'thing', but it's created by a lack of sunshine. But there's no way we could explain that to him now – it would be totally unhelpful.

At one stage, humankind thought that the world was earth-centric, and that the sun and moon revolved around the earth (OK, that's partly true!), but if some extra-terrestrials had arrived, and tried to explain that the earth was revolving around the sun, and was also spinning on its axis, they would probably have been locked up for being loopy. Indeed, didn't Galileo get it in the neck for suggesting that the earth revolved round the sun?

At one stage, Christians thought that the universe was created in six days – literally six periods of 24 hours – and it's not all that long ago that some Christians tried to insist that this should be taught in schools. Being realistic, as our scientific knowledge has increased, we've had to swallow our pride, as Christians, admit that we were wrong and rethink our interpretation.

Most Christians would now accept that the creation story, while it is definitely conveying truth, is not doing so in a literal, scientific way. Indeed, as with Zac's shadow, a scientific explanation would have been meaningless to its hearers. In any case, the aim of Genesis isn't to tell us **how** God created the universe, but **that** God created the universe, and also **why** God created the universe. Trying to insist on a literal six-day creation has been thoroughly counter-productive in terms of our witness to those who don't yet share our faith.

At one stage, Christians thought that it was perfectly right and proper to beat children; indeed, I understand that until relatively recently some Christians were still trying to insist on their right to continue to do so. This flies in the face of research showing the psychological damage that can be caused by our inflicting corporal punishment.

As Christians, we all want to base our beliefs on the Bible, but even though we believe that it is God-inspired, we still have to interpret it, and so we need to be (a) very careful in our interpreting and (b) realistic enough to accept that with some things we simply don't know and (c) humble enough to admit that it is not absolute truth, but is only our interpretation – fellow Christians, might interpret the scriptures differently – and (d) flexible enough to be willing to alter our interpretation in the light of humankind's growing knowledge about the universe. Inflexible dogmatism is a killer, and it seems to me that this dogmatism was what made Jesus most angry.

Let's look at one or two more issues with possibly changing interpretation.

Forty-odd years ago, in our first teaching posts, Sue had a colleague who started living with her boyfriend, and when they invited us round for a meal, we had a decision to make. They were clearly wrong in what they were doing, so we reckoned, but 'She's still my friend', said Sue. That perhaps sounds a little quaint now, or is it that we Christians are allowing our standards to slip?! Should we be continuing to insist that it's wrong to 'live in sin'; and what about divorce, is that a sin? And should divorced people remarry?

And then there's the gay issue. What is a Christian to think/do about that? Can we (should we?) change our views? Can our 'clear teaching of scripture' be maintained? Is it OK to reinterpret scripture in the light of new knowledge and new understandings of the human condition, and in the light of changes in culture?

When we interpret scripture, we do have to accept that it was written by humans and written for a particular cultural time, so to apply those writings to the current time and the current culture requires great care, and I feel that, above all, we must resist dogmatism.

It's on this principle that I've been able to more easily come to terms with some of the OT passages where God seems to be sanctioning – even instructing the Israelites to commit – what we would now call genocide: killing all the men, women and children. That is how the human writers saw it at the time, in their existing culture, so we have to ask whether we can (should?) read these passages literally as God specifically telling them to do all this killing.

I'm not trying to give you answers here, just asking the questions. But I am saying that we have to be humble enough to be willing to change our interpretation of scripture – as we have in the past – in the light of new knowledge and new understandings. We need to allow ourselves and each other to faithfully question what we've always been taught, and ask if it's an acceptable interpretation today, and not just react and make accusations of 'watering down' God's word.

Jesus wasn't afraid to challenge the dogmatic views of his time, such as the place of children in society and the place of women in society. It seems to me that the key is relationships – that's what God is, and that, I believe, was Jesus' priority in his day.

(I'm busy thinking what God's kingdom might look like, and some of the ideas in this and the previous article are springing out of that, but I think there's more to come. If you want to help me in my thinking through some of these issues, do give me a shout.)

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