

Old Testament in a Day

Sitting at the back of the church a few weeks ago while waiting for our daughters to finish choir practice, my husband started to read Numbers and Deuteronomy. I admit I'd never read them myself. The laws he described having read about sounded cruel and unjust. We wondered why these passages were in the Old Testament and why people weren't out in the streets campaigning against them!

My previous experience of reading the Old Testament had not all been positive either. There seemed to be a lot of violence and vengeance, boring genealogies, histories I found hard to put into context and I didn't feel I had understanding of the different styles of the books. So, I was very interested in Paul Smith and Georgina Watmore's idea of running a day with the theme 'What should we do with the Old Testament?'

Twelve of us met on Saturday 26th November for a pilgrimage around the church and an introduction to what the Old Testament has to offer. The day totally changed my view. Now I can't wait to get down to some serious reading. The insights offered by Paul and Georgina and the other members of the group were so fresh, it made me realise how Old Testament people were really just like us in many ways and how the theme of the Old Testament was the relationship of people with God. Added to which, of course, Jesus and his early followers were Jews who had grown up with the Old Testament and so much of the New Testament picks up and follows on from an intimate knowledge of the Old. Now I feel better equipped to know where I am going, what to start with and what to avoid.

My account is really a case of 'why I changed my mind'. I am sure that other members of the group had different highlights, but I cannot do much better than to provide an outline of the day, with the obvious proviso that Paul and Georgina said it all so much better, and throughout the day I had the feeling that we were all benefiting from a great deal of scholarship, very lightly worn.

Georgina started us off with a poster showing the 66 books of the Bible all lined up like individual books on a bookshelf and divided into different sections. This gave us a structure and I could see I wasn't the only one returning to this time and again during the day to see where we were; what came before and what was coming next. She talked about how the Bible was written and how we come to have it today and gave us a context. We then moved to the Hawthorne Chapel which was ready prepared for us with a small tree, a snake, apples and some plasticene.

Paul talked to us about the myths in the Old Testament and we were all creative – some more successfully than others. We then moved to the Jesus Chapel and constructed our own family trees. We talked about how we had gained knowledge of our own families. We saw that parts of Genesis were stories of ancestors probably passed down from one generation to the next over the fire at night, and maybe reflecting the individual view of the teller, so not at all objective.

Georgina handled the books of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, explaining their purpose and our view of these rules now. She pointed to parts of these books that we would definitely want to hold on to and which are inspiring, as well as those parts such as animal sacrifice, dietary restrictions and attitudes to women that we no longer retain. Then with velvety cloths representing the Mediterranean and the Promised Land, she told us the early history of the Nation of Israel using some very attractive and tactile wooden people. Now I knew how some of the History fitted together.

We broke for lunch and it was lovely to meet new people from St Anne's and St Bartholomew's, and I could tell that I was not the only one really enjoying the day. After lunch, we heard musical versions of some Psalms and were told that there was a Psalm to suit every mood, including when someone had just taken your parking space. We had reached the major and minor prophets in the history of Israel. Paul did something that led someone to comment that he had lost it, and he replied that was just what the people had told the Prophets!

We heard about the exile of the Israelites and how it is thought that it was in Babylon that The Bible was first written down. Georgina played us a film clip emphasising the power of the writings at the end of the Old Testament. Finally Paul talked about how the whole of the Old Testament led to Jesus. They both tried to emphasise the relevance of the Old Testament to our Christian faith. We finished with a short act of worship before emerging into the November gloom, feeling that we had gone a long way.

Paul and Georgina had put so much thought and preparation into the day. We were all really grateful and I am sure that we all got a great deal out of this exposure to parts of the Bible with which many of us aren't very familiar.

If they are prepared to run this day again sometime I would put your name down fast.

Rachel Woodley