

Along the track

The Book

Helen Garner wrote in her book, *Everywhere I Look*, about a visit to her home by Australian author and friend, Tim Winton. At the time Helen was sharing a house with a recently born-again, very fundamentalist Christian. She left Tim with him, 'the big black Bible on the table between them'. When she returned, Tim was alone. What happened? Winton said: "I told him to give the book a rest and let his life be the witness".

The Book (the Bible) and life are not mutually exclusive, rather each informs the other. Years ago, preachers were encouraged to prepare their homilies by meditating on the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. The people of Biblical times looked for wisdom and encouragement from the Book to inspire them to live life for their time, in the circumstances in which they found themselves – in good times, in exile, in war, in peace, in poverty and in prosperity. What was God asking of them in the here and now? Where did they find God's presence in their life? What did God want of them? How should they respond to these challenges of life in their time? The messages and messengers came from very unexpected quarters sometimes, from very unlikely people. Sometimes the message wasn't all that welcome - the great prophets of Israel, for example, were not always heard with enthusiasm. Sometimes the message even came from people not of their faith.

The Bible asks us to seek and find God by opening ourselves to the world around us with a listening ear, to be open and willing to be surprised by God in strange places, in ways we never thought we'd see and sometimes through the words of those we never thought we'd hear. To look at the Bible as a set of instructions straight from the mouth of God, to go looking for similar texts to prove a point, to look at the text literally without putting it in its context is limiting the power of the Bible to speak to us today. That approach limits the power of the Spirit who is continually at work in our world and in our lives. The Spirit continues to inspire.

The Spirit at work in people surprised Jesus at times – when he encountered the Roman the Centurion, Jesus says: "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith" (Luke 7:9). The Canaanite

woman, and her perseverance won Jesus over. "Woman, you have great faith!" he said. Jesus seemed impressed that, as foreigners, these were the least likely people to demonstrate great faith. Why should a centurion and a Canaanite put their trust in a Messiah his own countrymen had trouble accepting? Faith appears where least expected.

But on the other hand, the people who knew Jesus best faltered in their faith. On more than one occasion, Jesus was astonished at the twelve's lack of faith. Even after witnessing the Transfiguration, the three most trusted disciples joined the rest of the Twelve in abandoning Him. Peter even denied him in his hour of deepest need. None of them believed the wild reports the women brought back from the empty tomb. Even after Jesus appeared to them in person, "some still doubted" says Matthew (Mtt 28:17). Thomas doubted until he could actually touch the resurrected Jesus.

In telling these stories, in describing these encounters, the Bible asks us today - do we really believe God is with us? How do we show it? The Bible tells of God's loving involvement in history and how people responded, sometimes generously, sometimes walking away. Today the Bible continues to ask where do you find God in your life? When we read of God's presence in these ancient times, we are called to ask in our time, what does this ancient wisdom have to say to us today as we struggle to put bread on the table, to educate our children, to find joy, meaning and purpose in life?

The Bible is an extraordinary treasure, full of mystery, wonder, imagination, a love story that crosses century after century, born out of different cultures in times of plenty and rejoicing as well as times of exile and oppression. The Bible encourages us to be open the voice of God around us, everywhere. It asks us to reach out to all others, to listen, to be sensitive to God's presence in our lives and in the lives of others.

Regards
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