

*Fr Andrew Fenby*

There's a lot less in the Bible than you think there is. Or at least, there is a lot less of what you think there is in there than there actually is, and a lot more of all sorts of other stuff you never for one minute imagined was in there but is. And also quite a lot of stuff that you once heard and have now forgotten. And stuff that somebody once wrote two thousand years ago and everybody has now forgotten. Because for most of us our main interface with the Scriptures is what we hear read in Church during a service, we only ever experience a small part of what's between the covers of the good book. Sometimes we're having to take the kids to football or preparing for a visiting relative or recovering from the night before or off on a cruise or working shifts: because all the myriad ways modern life barges into our Sunday time, we keep missing that week when they read out the bit about unicorns, rainbows, glitter and whatnot (actually I think I'm the only person who's ever here for that reading). We miss a lot.

On the flip side, there's a lot less in the Bible of what you would think there would be featured in it *if* you'd got your idea of the contents of Holy writ from a lifetime of listening to Christians talking about their faith.

All sorts of things we take for granted, all sorts of things we know are gospel truth: not there. Here's a small selection. Adam's apple (the type of fruit isn't specified, but I reckon it was a mango). The three wise men (never been that many in the whole history of the world, certainly not on the same camel). Jonah's whale (it was a less

eco-friendly big fish). Statements like “This too shall pass.” Or “God works in mysterious ways”. ‘Be in the world but not of the world’. ‘God will not give you more than you can handle.’ ‘Money is the root of all evil.’ ‘God helps those who help themselves.’ ‘You can’t take it with you when you die.’ ‘Marriage is one man and one woman for life.’ ‘Only Christians can be saved.’ ‘Salvation by faith alone.’ ‘Accept Jesus into your heart as your personal Lord and Saviour.’ ‘Love the sinner, hate the sin’.

All the above. Not there.

There are also things that you thought were scriptural that *are* in the Bible but not nearly in the quantity you’d have thought given their prominence in Christian thinking. The flimsiest of scriptural fig leaves can be found in no particular order preserving the modesty of: The Holy Trinity; Guardian angels; angels of any description; Satan; Hell; husband-wife-2.2 children families; Prayers for the departed; Mary; Bishops, priests and deacons; and sinners.

For any but the newest of churchgoers, some of the entries on that list will be a surprise, and none more so than ‘sinners.’

Now humans like to categorise and dichotomise; to split ourselves into groups, tribes and opposing factions. Rich and poor, North and South, brextremists and remoaners, in and out. As religious people are also humans (though that might not always be easy to see) when we think about faith we love to cram each other into in/out boxes: believers and infidels, catholics and protestants, orthodox and heretics,

bishops and vertebrates and most fundamental of all, good and bad, aka saints and sinners usually shortened for convenience sake to us and sinners.

Clearly the concept of sin and its practitioners– somebody called a ‘sinner’– is not unheard of in the scrolls of scripture. But it’s nowhere near as prominent or as clearcut in/out as a couple of thousand years of our religious practice has made it. There are, of course sins (lots of them), and people who commit them (lots of *them* too), but how that all works through into salvation is complex and nuanced. When salvation history reaches its culmination– in the person of Jesus– the whole coherence of the ‘us and them’ system crumbles. If the Gospels are to be believed- as they should be- Jesus spoke and behaved as though the human category known as ‘sinners’ did not exist. Dive into the jottings of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and it’s crystal clear that Jesus’ world view doesn’t really contain that group. “Sinner” is a religious label, an abusive judgement, a stereotype, a way of defining a person according to real or perceived transgressions against a religious code, a way of assigning a person to an out group of the impure to be shunned, avoided and in some cases punished. There’s a pretty good working definition of a sinner. But when Jesus comes along, the people who tick those boxes... are his friends. The people he eats with and consorts with, moves among and talks with, the ones he encourages to follow him. Once Jesus gets going, the whole saints and sinners business is a lot more complicated than we might have initially thought, a lot less comfortable than it might have been.

So rather rail against tax collectors, sabbath breakers, sex workers and adulterers in Mark and Matthew's gospels Jesus only really talks about other people as sinners when he refers to the religious authorities: 'See the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners'. In John's gospel you can find 'sinner' in its native habitat: used by the religious authorities to describe *Jesus* when they are interrogating the man born blind, outraged at him having been healed on the sabbath (look out for that in the Gospel next week). More sinners turn up in the parables of Luke. However, rather than being affronts to be kept at arm's length, they are the people that Heaven opens its arms to welcome. They are the people God uses not for exemplary punishment *pour encourager les autres*, but to shine a light on the hypocrisies of the upright and the pious, to highlight the depredations of the finger wagers and the stone throwers. Jesus comes to call those who are lost. Not because they are the most terrible of all sinners, but as a wake up call to those who think that they are not lost.

And so, the woman at the well. Here, live and in real time, is Jesus choosing the weak to shame the strong.

Although it's often presented as such, this is not a story about who's in and who's out. Sure, on the surface what's noticeable is some taboo breaking radical inclusion (Anglican bishops take note). Jesus stops, talks and socialises with a person conventional wisdom would have him steer well clear of, a person who is on so many levels a social pariah: a woman, a Samaritan, and the possessor of a highly suspect personal history and quite possibly negotiable virtue. She's at the well on her

own, either deliberately avoiding other people or being avoided by them, probably both. Let's just say she's not a pillar of the community. But Jesus ignores propriety, stops and engages with her. He sees not a sinner but his sister.

It's a good thing to see and understand that in this story. But that's only starters. If we stop there and take that as the end point of the story, we'll be getting it very wrong. Because very often this kind of 'inclusion' is anything but. What seems to be welcome is patronising and disempowering, because it is the already powerful and privileged who decide to include the outsider, or not. That's the way we like it of course, but it's not really any sort of inclusion if the powerful are the gatekeepers, (again, Anglican bishops take note), it's not really any sort of inclusion if those who are 'in' decide who can come in and those who are not must wait on the whim of the already favoured.

That's how it usually happens. Then up pops Jesus and suddenly all manner of undesirables barge past the self-appointed sentries. How surely to the guardians it must feel that the kingdom is being taken by violence.

Back to the woman at the well, Saint Photine in Eastern Christian tradition. There is much unsaid in the story we have, but much is clear: the woman is a social outcast. She is at the well on her own and given that later it transpires she has had many lovers and is indeed currently shackled up in what seems to be a fairly informal arrangement, the assumption is that this is what has made her ostracised. But, let us

beware: this story is not about is promiscuity. When Jesus raises the woman's love life he's not trying to impress her with some fairground mind-reading trick, and he's not brought it up in order to tell her off. *This* story doesn't end with Jesus saying 'go away and sin no more'. This story ends with the woman— unchanged and unrepentant— a prophet, an apostle, and an evangelist.

Far from telling us 'see how nice Jesus was, he even spoke to sinners' the story of the woman at the well tells us about who can do theology, about where the good ground for the Word is, about where the genuine voice of prophecy is to be heard: not in the palaces and the synagogues, in the basilicas and synods, but crying in the social wilderness.

The gospels are full of accounts of individuals meeting Jesus- Nicodemus, Photine, Zacchaeus, Pilate; the man born blind, the woman with the haemorrhage, the Syro-Phoenecian woman, the Gerasene demoniac. Jesus talks and teaches, listens and heals; one to one, upfront and personal. It would be easy then to deduce that Christianity is all about the individual and their response to Jesus, a personal faith. But looked at not as each individual interaction but at the sum of the encounters it's clear that Jesus' goal is to change society, not to 'fix' individual members so the existing system can run more smoothly.

If then, we want to hear as Jesus heard, if we want to hear the Word in the world, we must listen for the voices of those our world says are broken, and listen for cries of

those for whom our world is broken. Then our hearts will be pulled ever closer to the Sacred Heart of the Divine.