The Bible with Imagination

Just imagine you are sitting in a church in medieval Europe. You might see the Bible chained to the lectern up in the sanctuary. It comes to the reading and you need to ask yourself: but do I know Latin?!

But we can imagine back further. Imagine you are in France at Lyons in the late second century and the famous bishop, Irenaeus, is in his study. On his desk is a rather chunky book. It contains the four gospels. By his time they were all revered by most Christians. There is probably another chunky book not far away, containing all of Paul's letters. Perhaps he has other parts of what later became the New Testament as well; they might have been in the form of scrolls, rolled up and tied with string of flax.

Imagine back another 120 years and we could catch a glimpse of Paul in Corinth. He is walking around a table dictating slowly what he wants to say to the Romans. The writer, pen in hand, has a roll of papyrus unravelled and etches the black letters onto the surface keeping carefully within the outlines drawn to define each column as the text moves sideways along the scroll. Paul was concerned about his planned visit to Rome, because people had been criticising his approach. He wanted to reassure the Christians in Rome that the stance he took was perfectly consistent with the gospel. He was not watering down the faith or undermining what the Scriptures taught. Scriptures for him were the writings of the Old Testament.

This was a very human situation which called on all Paul's ability to persuade and explain. We know it was a divine situation, that is, that what he produced was inspired, in the sense that it not only helped the Romans; it has helped generations since. God spoke and speaks through what Paul wrote. The New Testament is made up of writings which worked like this. People soon registered their value, copied them, collected them, linked them with others and finally, over the next century or so, produced the New Testament.

Did Paul imagine he was writing Scripture for future generations? Probably not, although Romans is certainly his best coverage of the main themes of the Christian faith. Many of his letters are much more specific. For instance, the ones he wrote to Corinth - we only have two of them; there probably at least four - were full of issues which concerned him about the congregations there. They even include travel plans and advice about how to collect money for the poor in Palestine. These were letters responding to special situations. The problems were not so different from the ones we face today: people going off the rails; too much emphasis on words and not enough on deeds; divisions and rivalry among leaders; disregard of the needy. Paul cared about what was going on and so he wrote. It was not just practical advice. It was spiritual: doing what the Spirit calls us to do. It was inspired and it was human.

If we imagine back another two or three years we might see Paul sitting in Ephesus very worried on two fronts: about Corinth and about Galatia. He had preached the gospel in Corinth and founded the church there, but people didn't seem to understand that Christ did not set them free to do as they liked. How could he stop them forgetting about humility and practical caring as they got all carried away with religious experiences, even to the extent of doing immoral acts and feeling they could get away with it? In Galatia the problem was quite different. Churches he once founded now seemed to be turning their back on him. Other visiting preachers had arrived in those churches claiming that Paul was betraying the gospel and Scripture by watering it down. They knew about Paul's argument with Peter, when most people sided with Peter (Gal 2:11-14). Paul had his back to the wall. These were still his worries when he wrote to Rome.

The problem was even worse because people who knew what was happening in Corinth could point the finger and say: 'See, Corinth proves it! Paul's approach leads to a betrayal of the gospel!' What was the trouble? At its heart, it was all about how to understand the Bible. Paul had said that Christ is the new way to God, foretold in the scriptures. People need to believe in Christ, believe that Christ died for them, turn from sin to Christ and find forgiveness and new life.

The other preachers would have agreed with him thus far. But then Paul said: so you no longer have to tell people they must be circumcised and keep the commandments about food and things like that. People, especially people who are not Jews, just need to accept Christ and live a new life in Christ, which will more than satisfy the demands of the ten commandments. In this way Paul believed that some of the barriers
could be dismantled which discriminated against people who were not Jews.

Imagine you are in one of the churches in Galatia. They are discussing 'the problem with Paul'. 'What is the problem?' you ask? 'Paul thinks he can pick and choose in scripture about what you can obey. God commanded that people who are not Jews should be circumcised when they join the community of faith. It says so clearly in Genesis 17. The commandments about food were given to Moses for all time. How can you play around with God's word! Once you start doing that, you are asking for trouble. Just look at what has been happening in Corinth!'

The big problem was: how do interpret the Bible. Was Paul really playing fast and loose with scripture, dropping the awkward bits to make conversions easier? That is what people were saying. He argued that he was not. But he did have a different approach to scripture. They saw it as valid and infallible for all time; he did not. He saw it as inspired, but as having some parts which could be set aside as belonging to a previous era. They needed to be set aside so that the community could be more inclusive. Being inclusive was not a modern, liberal thought which Paul was importing into Christianity; it was right at the heart of the teaching and ministry of Jesus, who ate with toll collectors and sinners and called all to follow him. It was about love and compassion.

Paul's opponents also believed in compassion. The issue was whether it justified declaring some parts of scripture as no longer applicable or not. In Acts 15 we read that most agreed that at least some things could be set aside; that included circumcision; but there was a problem with the rest and on this they strongly disagreed, even at the top level, like Peter and James. Paul's approach was to set Christ at the heart of his interpretation of scripture and see everything else in the light of Christ and his teaching. Others insisted on both Christ and every word of scripture. At worst this approach was very inflexible: 'If the Bible says it, that settles it!' It doesn't matter about how it discriminates against people.

Imagine what Paul would feel if we were able to sit down and talk with him today about the place of slaves and women in society. He (or someone close to him) wrote that they should retain their subordinate position (Col 3:18, 22). I can imagine Paul today wholeheartedly agreeing that the gospel should lead to treating all equally. If we could magically transport him into a modern congregation, I am sure he would not be put out that women are in worship with uncovered heads, contrary to his advice (1 Cor 11:4-6). Paul would move with the times, when it was appropriate. But I can also imagine Paul taking us to task for moving with the times in ways that are inappropriate, too.

Paul had a Christ centred approach to scripture which left him free to see the wood from the trees and to read it critically in a way that did justice to its central concerns. His various opponents were uncomfortable with his approach. Some feared it was dangerous and would not leave people with firm directions. Others saw it as an outrageous betrayal of both the scriptures and Christ. Theirs was a genuine concern based on their understanding of scripture as for all time infallible. How could it be otherwise if the Bible is the Word of God?

We can use our imagination to get away from the heat of controversy and enter into churches where the issues are quite different. If we could drop in on the author of Matthew's gospel about 30 years after Paul was writing his letters, we might be able to catch him in the process of writing. On his table there would be a well worn scroll full of stories and sayings of Jesus: the gospel of Mark. There must have been another scroll sitting there which mainly had sayings in it. There was also the writer's memory of other stories he had heard.

Imagine he is still writing chapter 7. He is poring over this other scroll. We can't see much detail, but there are indications that someone has already written extra material in the margins. Most of it just looks like what we find in the second half of Luke 6. He has just copied the part about building houses on sand or on a rock, not as a straight copy, but putting it in his own words. The aim was not to reproduce exactly what was there. People knew Jesus spoke Aramaic. At some stage those who also spoke Greek would have put it into Greek. Others would have passed it on. Someone wrote it down. Eventually it got onto this old scroll. Now Matthew captures its gist: content was the thing, not trying to preserve the exact wording which no one knew any more. Matthew has a very neat way of putting things.
When Matthew reaches the end of that saying, he switches over to Mark and finds the place where he last was in that scroll. He had already used some later summary pieces, but he wanted to put in the statement he found in Mark 1:22 about Jesus teaching with authority and not like the scribes. He would have remembered it because he had decided to leave out the story to which it belonged (Mark 1:21-28; the healing of demoniac in the synagogue). He didn't want to let this piece slip and it fitted so well just here. So in it went: Matthew 7:29. Only a few minor changes. Instead of saying, 'and not as the scribes', he wrote: 'and not as their scribes'. Matthew himself would probably have called himself a Christian scribe; just to make things clear.

If we came back to Matthew a week or so later and checked on progress, we might still find him at it. Putting Mark together with the material from the other document was producing a much longer gospel. He took Mark as the main outline, but every now and again, turned across to the other document to supplement it. If we could see him writing up the story of the rich man coming to Jesus we would notice a few interesting things.

Mark tells the story in 10:17-22. Matthew reworks it into his version in 19:16-22. Luke also uses it in Luke 18:18-23. I think Matthew must have either given this a lot of thought as he wrote or he remembered the way he had retold it once and shaped it in that light. He makes the man a young man. In Mark the man looked back on his youth. Matthew changes the words of Jesus so that Jesus says: 'If you want to be perfect..'. 'Perfect' in Greek also means, 'mature', so Matthew makes the story into a message about growing up! If you want to grow up in the faith, keep the commandments and do it Jesus' way! Follow Jesus and become his disciple!

It is clear from the way Matthew is so careful about doing such things that he has one central concern: to pass on as faithfully as possible the message of Jesus and to do so in a way that makes an impact on those who will hear the gospel read. Perhaps there would be some people who would have thought that Matthew should not have altered a single word. What was written was written. What Jesus said must not be reworded. But everyone knew that Mark had been doing exactly what Matthew had done, probably with much less adequate resources. And everyone was confident that what they were doing was exactly what needed to be done: telling it how it is, getting the message of Jesus across. People were not bothered about exact wording. They were not even concerned about exact details of events. That is why we have four gospels and not one. But they were concerned about the heart of the matter and there certainly were major details which were non negotiable. It was a way of handling the stories and saying of Jesus which put the focus on Jesus and his message.

If people had got hold of the two versions of the story about the rich man and put them side by side, they would not have been worried about the fact that they are not the same. Obviously Jesus said something on the occasion. It is more likely to be what Mark reports than what Matthew reports, but it may have been what neither reports, but something like it and that was all that mattered. These were normal human processes of passing on stories and you would expect such differences.

Inspired? I should say so! God works in just such situations where people like Matthew are committed to Christ and being faithful to his word. In the case of Matthew and the gospel writers, the proof of the pudding was in the eating. Yes, Christ spoke through their gospels! They were copied, collected, and finally found their into the New Testament.

When we approach the Bible we need to take all these things into account. With Paul we need to work out what is central and what is less important, even dispensible, and not run with the approaches followed by his opponents. With the gospels we need to watch the way they tell the stories so that we can grasp what the real message is and not get distracted by the various differences or by what was geared to a particular audience.

Imagination is a way of getting in touch with what is real. Getting real about the Scriptures means takes them seriously as God's gift to the Church and letting them speak to us on their terms.