Reflections on the Bible in the Church Project in 2013

I agreed without thinking much to be part of the panel today, then realized I had spoken under a similar title at Atlanta in 2010. So I asked how this occasion was to be different and was told that the idea was to cover what had happened since then and what had been by further reflections. Thereupon I felt embarrassed, because I haven’t thought about the project since it finished and I haven’t been involved in any discussion of it. I felt slightly less guilty when I realized that I have not heard the report referred to in the Diocese of Los Angeles. There have been many things that parishes have been encouraged to think about and be involved in, but I am not aware of this project being one of them.

There are cynics who might offer the following interpretation. The project was set up in the context of the crisis over same-sex marriage in the Anglican Communion, but the idea was that we should not actually consider this question, and it did not even seem to be the elephant in the room, but maybe it was. I doubt if there is a diocese that is more committed to same-sex relationships than Los Angeles (after all, we are in California), and our focus on this issue and other issues related to peace and justice would make it natural just not to feel that the project is very important.

This possibility connects with another consideration. I was also asked this year to comment on the essays to accompany the draft liturgical material on the blessing of same-sex relationships. I think I was asked partly because I had also been one of the “traditionalist” group on the earlier theological task force considering same-sex relationships. One of my reflections on this collection of essays was the not-very surprising and not-very surprised one that they simply ignored the considerations that the traditionalists put forward in that earlier report.

So I guess I am feeling that maybe we are just playing a game in thinking that we are serious about biblical interpretation.

That thought coheres with a more general one that I have. I sometimes think that my students, most of whom are broadly evangelical, see it as my job to assure them that the Bible says nothing that conflicts with what they think already. They are, after all, enlightened Western Christians.

Related presuppositions will underlie the SBL meeting. We bring our Western enlightenment to the Bible, and it often enables us to see things we had not seen before. We see ways in which previous generations had misunderstood scripture. At other points our Western enlightenment is at odds with what we read in the Bible, and we infer that the biblical writers were understandably limited by their context and presuppositions. We methodologically exclude the idea that the Bible could raise questions about our assumptions and attitudes. SBL excludes the idea; my students do so; the Episcopal Church does so. We trust ourselves to be right. After all, we are enlightened Western Christians.

This consideration leads me to restate some things I said at Atlanta. The Anglican Communion has some unresolved uncertainty about the relationship of Scripture, tradition, the creeds, reason, culture, and experience. While it may be okay to use the Bible to support ideas that come from our contemporary world, there is a risk involved when we stop there. We also need to use the Bible to set our culture’s ideas in a new context which may make a big difference to them, to critique our culture’s ideas in light of the Bible, and to see new insights in the Bible that our culture has not seen. One point about having the Bible is to listen to it saying things that are different from what we are inclined to think, and to allow for the possibility that it may be right.

For instance, it seems quite obvious that the biblical God has “a preferential option for the poor” and that God is a God of justice. But the notion of justice and of social justice is rarely defined. When it is defined it suggests a concern with human rights, an equitable distribution of resources, a healthy planet, and democracy. These are all good things, but they are not a profile that emerges from the Bible. The Old Testament notion of justice is quite different from the one that prevails in the West, and biblical ideas about the subject to which the phrase “social justice” points suggest a different framework from the one that prevails. Suppose, for instance, that we started taking seriously the idea that lending is not a means of making more money but a way of being helpful to people who are in financial trouble. Or suppose we started taking seriously the idea the local community is the one that takes care of matters of justice and the support of the needy.

At Atlanta I also relayed a comment that someone made in one of our studies. In his eight years of experience in a small Episcopal Church, he told us, the Bible does not play a prominent role in the lives of parishioners. “Most parishioners seem to have their own personal beliefs and ethics,” he said, “and attempting to mine Scripture for ethical guidance in the world would not be something I would expect to see happen very often.” My comment is that this is broadly true in our church, though not in ours alone. We make up our minds on the basis of convictions we have somehow come to and are prepared to attribute to the Holy Spirit, but there is no serious testing of whether we are right in that attribution. They are so obviously true, there is really no need.