

One of the things that gets me close to slapping someone is when they say that they find such comfort in the Bible. I have to say that the more I read it the more flipping challenging and difficult it becomes. It's like a lamp which shines right into the bits of me I'd rather keep hidden, because they are the bits which aren't quite right yet, which are a work in progress. Far from being soothing, like oil or honey, the Bible can be spicy and hot, like chilli on your meat. Be careful. The Word of God is a sharp knife.

John 5. 30 – end is not a comfortable passage. Another thing which makes me want to slap people is when they say that Jesus was a kind man and his teaching was all about love. Both things are true, in their way, but here the loving thing Jesus does is to challenge people, to have a downright argument with them, to point out that they are plain wrong. I spend a lot of my life listening carefully to people, because Vicars do that, and trying to work from where they are, and being nice, and affirming people. Jesus doesn't, here at least. He tells people they are wrong and what they've got to do to change. It's quite refreshing really. I might try it.

Jesus here is chilli, not honey, and that takes some getting used to. And if you listen carefully, it's a challenge to us too. Effectively Jesus says that the people, who think that they are faithfully following what God wants, have got so used to reading and hearing God's commands, have got such an all encompassing religious culture, have got such a religious pattern of life, that they have replaced the following of God and hearing God's voice with the carrying out of their culture. They 'search the scriptures', and study the law. That's excellent. But they do it in a way which means they can't see what's plainly before them, They can't hear what God is saying through Christ because they already know what they want to hear.

In 1954 the manager of the famous concert hall in Nashville, the Grand Ole Opry, told a young singer that he would never make it, and that he should go back to driving a truck. Elvis Presley didn't. 12 publishers rejected a book about a school for wizards by an unknown author called J K Rowling. As a young journalist Walt Disney was told that he lacked creativity and had no good ideas. In 1962, four young musicians went to audition for Decca Records. Decca rejected them saying, "We don't like their sound, and their guitar music is on the way out". They were called The Beatles.

Jesus says to the people who don't get him that the problem is not him, but with their perception of him. All they have to do is look again, with fresh eyes, and don't let their preconceptions, their prejudices, stop God speaking to them through him. And that gives me pause for thought. How many times have I listened to something in the church, some new person, new movement, and thought that it's just wrong, because it goes against everything I've grown up with? That can be as small as a new style of music or language in worship, or as huge as the nature of gender and ministry, the differences between denominations over Holy Communion, even the reinterpretation of doctrine.

I search the Scriptures, but I'd rather they made me feel better, not hit me in the face. I look to our traditions, such as in this 400 year old service we sing week by week, but I'd rather they were honey rather than chilli. When you look at it, the *Magnificat* is the most remarkable song about the overturning of human norms there has ever been. The rich get

hammered, the powerful chopped down, the poor win, the oppressed triumph. We should be quaking in our boots, not enjoying the polyphony and admiring the organ accompaniment – beautiful as they are. This service should prevent us from ever being pleased with ourselves. We cannot go out of here the same as we came in.

Jesus invites us to accept that he reveals the Father, that his words and actions are not there to be studied and set aside, they are there to be acted upon and placed at the centre of all we are. Search the scriptures. Read them carefully. Come to Alpha and ask challenging questions. Above all, don't potter along thinking you've got it sorted. God is bigger than that. If you value the traditions, if you love the scriptures, then a moment's reflection will tell you that there is so much more to learn.