

We must return to Biblical values, folk urge.

But which bits of the Bible do they have in mind?

Jesus commanding love of enemies or giving away all we have?

The sexy Song of Songs, which puts D H Lawrence to shame?

Perhaps not. But maybe they draw on the Epistles,

confused and confusing books which call us to live a holy life,

treating the body as a temple of the Spirit as in Philippians 4:8:

‘Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just,

whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence,

if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.’

Many undoubtedly yearn for a return to the Ten Commandments,

keeping a holy day, honouring (not too cantankerous) parents,

firmly opposing murder, adultery, stealing, lying and coveting.

All very worthy aspirations, I hope drawing a line at the burnings,

hangings or stonings reserved for commandment-breakers;

although the zealous look in their eye rather makes me wonder.

Or maybe folk prefer our Lord's summary of the Law,
'Love the Lord your God lock, stock and barrel, and
your neighbour as yourself.' (Deuteronomy 6:5, Leviticus 9:18)
Again I wonder whether neighbour includes Samaritans,
good or bad, or people trafficked across the English Channel.

I see the Bible as the book or the books of the people, 66 in all,
charting their right and wrong turnings as they seek to read God.

I baulk at any Biblical book which condones even encourages
misogynism or violence against women or genocide,
so most of the OT really should carry a health warning.

The Law is a cocktail of divine aspiration and human prejudice.

Even those who deem the books of the Law infallible
are forced to see some parts as allegorical rather than literal.

Or they allot each command a place in an arbitrary league table
where condemning same-sex behaviour is primary
whereas avoiding eating shellfish is secondary.

From the shellfish's point of view,
not being eaten seems pretty primary to me.

I warm to Sebastian in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*:

‘My dear Sebastian, you can't possibly believe it all,’

says Charles. ‘I mean about Christmas and the star
and the three kings and the ox and the ass.’

‘Oh yes, I believe that. It's a lovely idea.’

‘But you can't believe things because they are a lovely idea.’

‘But I *do*. That's how I believe.’

To the man whose tongue was bound, Jesus said Ephphatha,
Aramaic for be opened, a lovely idea. He was talking, I guess
to all whose lives are bound by rules, prejudices, fear.

Be opened, be opened to my spirit, and let the rest go hang.

The letter of the law kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Or as St Augustine said, ‘Love; and do what you will.’