Christianity is not, as some would have it, the religion of a book. The books of the Bible are the creation of the Church, not visa versa. They were written by members of the Church, for members of the Church, and they can be truly understood and interpreted only by the Church.

For the first 400 years of Christian history the Bible, as we know it, did not exist. The first Christians had no written records of the Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus. They didn’t need them. They could appeal to first-hand witnesses who passed their message by word of mouth. When those first Christians spoke of the Scriptures, they meant the scriptures of Jewish faith; the collection of books we call the Old Testament.

The Old Testament

The Hebrew Scriptures were written over many centuries by many different authors who probably had no idea that they were writing sacred books.

Some of those authors recorded folk stories and legends, some recorded laws and regulations, some recorded history and some wrote poetry. And all of them were ordinary people who were limited in their understanding by the limited knowledge of their time.

It is therefore rather silly to expect the Old Testament to give us scientific answers to questions about creation or evolution. It is not a scientific book. It is a collection of books which give us a picture of God’s gradual revelation of himself to Israel, the Old Testament Church.

The New Testament

The creation of the New Testament was also a gradual process.

The first writings were probably collections of our Lord’s sayings and letters to local churches from the leaders of the Church. Then, as the first hand witnesses began to die, it became necessary to record their witness.

Many of those first writings have been lost and forgotten but others had an enduring quality and gradually the Church began to gather them into a collection that has formed the basis of our New Testament.

By 200 CE a consensus was beginning to emerge about what books should be included in, or rejected from, the New Testament. But it took another 200 years before the list of New Testament books was recognisable as the New Testament we have today.

The New Testament

The first writings were probably collections of our Lord’s sayings and letters to local churches from the leaders of the Church. Then, as the first hand witnesses began to die, it became necessary to record their witness.

Many of those first writings have been lost and forgotten but others had an enduring quality and gradually the Church began to gather them into a collection that has formed the basis of our New Testament.

By 200 CE a consensus was beginning to emerge about what books should be included in, or rejected from, the New Testament. But it took another 200 years before the list of New Testament books was recognisable as the New Testament we have today.

The Gospels

To understand the Gospels we must recognise that they were not written for a worldwide audience. They were each written with a particular audience in mind. Each Gospel has its own theme, its own purpose and its own emphasis.

The Gospel of Mark was probably written first, around 65 CE. It was written for non Jewish Christians in the Church of Rome and according to Papias, an early Christian historian, it is a record of the teaching of St Peter.

Because it was written for non Jewish Christians, Mark’s Gospel contains a number of explanations of Jewish customs and Aramaic words and pays little attention to the Old Testament.

Mark, the author of this Gospel, may have been the ‘John Mark’ of Acts and two verses of his Gospel suggest that he might have been a first-hand witness to at least part of the ministry of Jesus.

He records that when Jesus was arrested, ‘...a young man followed him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body; and they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked.’ (Mark 14:51-52) This incident is not mentioned in the other three Gospels and it adds little to the narrative of Mark’s Gospel. So why is it mentioned at all? One possible answer is that Mark was writing about himself and that this is his way of saying, ‘I was there. I saw what happened’.

The Gospel of Matthew has a different flavour and style. It was written for Jewish converts and therefore sets out to prove, with numerous Old
Testament references, that Jesus is the promised Messiah and the fulfilment of Old Testament prophesies.

Matthew the Apostle did not write this Gospel. He would not have needed to use Mark’s Gospel as a source-book for the life of Jesus as this writer has done. But Papias, the Christian historian mentioned earlier, records that “Matthew gathered together the sayings of Jesus in the Hebrew tongue” and it may well be that Matthew’s collection of sayings formed the basis of this Gospel which was then attached to his name.

The Gospel of Luke has been called ‘the thinker’s Gospel’. It was written, along with the Acts of the Apostles, by the doctor who accompanied Saint Paul on his journeys and is an educated apologia for Christianity.

Luke set out to explain and prove that Christianity was not merely a Jewish sect but a Faith adequate to meet the spiritual needs of the Roman Empire.

The Gospel of John is quite different from the other three Gospels. The author, who may have been Saint John the Apostle, set out to write an ordered meditation on the life of Jesus. He recorded that Jesus lived, died and was resurrected from death. But he goes further. He began to explore and explain the meaning behind those facts.

John writes theology (remembering that theology is what happens when we begin to ask questions about what we believe). His Gospel bears the stamp of one who was looking back and reflecting on experiences which happened long ago.

The New Testament Letters

Most of the other books in the New Testament are letters (epistles). The authors of those letters had no idea that their letters would be kept and treasured by future generations. They were writing to particular people or communities about specific issues and problems. Sometimes it is hard for us to understand what these issues and problems might have been.

Reading the letters is like listening to one end of a telephone conversation. But we do hear enough to catch the flavour of life in the first century Church. And we hear enough to catch Saint Paul’s vision of the Church as the body of Christ; a vision which is as relevant today as it was 2000 years ago.

How to read the Bible

Most people, at some time or other, try to read the Bible like any other book, from beginning to end. Few people succeed. And even if they do succeed, they are usually none the wiser for their effort.

That’s not surprising. Trying to read the Bible from beginning to end makes as much sense as trying to read all the books in the Public Library without a reading plan and without the help of the librarian.

The Bible is the Church’s library and the Church makes a good librarian. When we read the Bible it makes good sense to ask the librarian for a reading plan and the Church provides us with a number of Bible Reading plans.

Bible Reading Notes are available at very little cost from The Bible Reading Fellowship or The Scripture Union. The notes divide the Bible into daily readings and give an explanation of what is being read.

Or you could follow the Lectionary: the table of appointed Psalm and Scripture readings for use at regular Church services. The Lectionary provides for the continuous reading of scripture, day by day. But it does not provide explanatory notes to go with the readings. For that you will need a Commentary.

A Bible Commentary gives the background of the book being read and comments on the text, verse by verse. Your parish clergy will be able to recommend a suitable Commentaries.

But is it true?

There are many contemporary Christians who would have it that the Bible is the infallible Word of God; that it is totally free from error and true in every part.

But Archbishop Michael Ramsey reminded us that: ‘The central fact of Christianity is not a book but a Person - Jesus Christ, himself described as the Word of God’.

This knowledge has enabled Anglicans to avoid the superstitious idolatry of Biblical Literalism and Fundamentalism and has allowed us the freedom to look critically at the Bible.

Consequently, over the past one hundred and fifty years, Anglican scholars have subjected the Bible to a scientific examination such as no other book has ever endured. In the process some sacred cows have been slaughtered and some golden calves have been destroyed but the revelation of God in the Bible has emerged from the experience with a renewed and vigorous authority.

It is still a book of power. Its words continue to change the lives of those who pick it up and read it. And the voice of Jesus, the Word of God, speaks even more powerfully from its pages.