

Sermon, Bible Sunday, 29th October 2023

Loving Lord, grant that, by reading the written word, and hearing the spoken word, through the power of Your Holy Spirit we may know better the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

How often do you read your Bible? How well do you *know* your Bible?

How would you describe your relationship with the Bible?

Or, whisper it, do you even *have* a Bible?

There's a story of an American couple who have their minister round for dinner once a year, and always put the silver out for him. After one visit, they can't find the silver spoon he used, and think "surely he can't have pinched it!". They agonise about this and, next year, they pluck up the courage to ask him, "don't suppose you've seen the silver spoon we always give you?". "Certainly", he replies, "I put it in your Bible".

What is your relationship with the Bible?

I came to faith through Prayer Book and hymn book, and the Bible came later for me – Prayer Book Holy Communion reads an Epistle and Gospel each week, and leaves much of the rest of the book alone...

When I trained as a Reader, I started trying to say Morning and Evening Prayer daily; these have 2 Bible readings, plus Psalms, each, which increases the amount of Scripture in one's diet considerably...

The Bible is of course a book of books, a collection of different types of writing; poetry, prose; proverbs, history, biography etc., and one would not read each of these in quite the same way.

When I was younger, my relationship with the Bible was simpler, and I found great hope and consolation in it. As we get older and life more complex, our relationships with the Bible can get more complicated too. It may no longer be *simply* "the tale of the loving purposes of God", but the complex story of a long relationship between Creation+Creator, with all the inevitable misunderstandings, recurring problems, and hard work, of any such relationship. If one reads any 4 biographies of the same person, one immediately understands many of the issues of 4 Gospels! I am proud of our Protestant tradition in this country of our rights of free speech, and free reading – William of Tynedale's boast to the Bishops that "I will teach the boy that followeth the plough to know more of Scripture than ye" – but it is also terribly easy to get the wrong end of the stick with the Bible sometimes. In the original Hebrew, God is singular in Genesis 1 and plural in Genesis 2 – the text is fragile like parchment, and needs great care in unfolding it.

We lose so much in translation – St Mark's Gospel is all actually in the present, immediate, tense – "now Jesus is doing this", "immediately He goes here" – but we don't get that in our versions!

In addition, Article 20 of the Articles of Religion in the Book of Common Prayer states that “it is not lawful... for the Church to so expound one place of Scripture that it be repugnant to another”. So, the preacher cannot use Christ’s words to St John about love to help them ignore particular bits of Leviticus (or even, Heaven forbid, St Paul!) which they don’t like, or find difficult. That clause rightly makes the preacher’s job a lot harder! One can’t just pick and mix.

One of my Air Cadet Officers is insisting on starting the Bible at the beginning, and I wish he was not! He is slowing down, and I am not sure he is going to make it to the Gospels in my lifetime...

I loved the old Prayer Book daily lectionary, which puts some of the more controversial bits of Leviticus on 29th February, so they are only read every four years! Though thankful for its clues to lead us up to God, we need both some *support* (from a little study), and selective *structure* (from some lectionary or other), in order to be wise with this most powerful, precious book; we need some “third way” between reading the Bible – and *not* reading the Bible!

Our relationship with the Bible can, like our lives, become more complex; and a work in progress! I find so many of its treasures intertwining with my life over the decades; I love the fact that the beautiful funeral line from Deuteronomy “underneath are the everlasting arms” might in fact originally be about weapons and war, but our translation has accidentally made it far kinder, and much more helpful... So many of the Bible’s treasures are well hidden; but regular, regulated reading gives us more chances to find God’s great + gracious responses to our daily lives...

We’re invited to carry the text gently, read it with guidance, hold it as a whole, keep open and attentive to the hidden treasures, the glimpses of the glory of God – for, of course, the Bible isn’t the be-all and end-all itself, it’s not an end in itself, but a means to an end – it’s the depiction, through a whole library, of God’s love for us – and many frustrations with the book are in how we record, reflect+respond to that unchanging love.

As Anglicans, we’re called to find God through the combination of Scripture, tradition, and reason – not, as Lutherans say, “*sola Scriptura*”, not Scripture alone, but the dance between our sense, the Book, and the Church. Theologian Jurgen Moltmann banged his Bible on the lectern and said “this is not the word of God – Jesus is the Word of God”.

The Bible is there to lead us up to God, in concert and combination with help from others, and our own heads.

We need not just support and structure, but the Spirit – there’s a lovely hymn verse:

“Come, Holy Ghost (for, moved by Thee, the Prophets wrote and spoke) – Unlock the truth: Thyself the key! Unseal the sacred book.”

*In the Name of the Father + of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, **AMEN.***