

## Sermon for Bible Sunday

## Mother Emma

Readings: Nehemiah 8:1-4a, 8-12, Colossians 3:12-17, Matthew 24:30-35

The days are growing shorter and darker and the news seems unrelentingly depressing and doom-laden. Many of us live in a constant state of anxiety about what will happen next. Perhaps we come this morning distracted by the responsibilities we bear – for feeding our families, paying our bills or our employees, even (in the case of clergy!) for protecting the health of our church congregations; all of us wrestling with ever-changing risk assessments and the real, agonising human risks which lie behind them. Thrown back on our own devices, isolated at home with only screens, or possibly books and newspapers, to provide uplifting entertainment and inspiration for ourselves and our families, where can we go to find hope, comfort, and inspiration in this alien situation? Perhaps you won't be altogether surprised to hear your Vicar urging you to turn to the pages of Scripture.

Today we celebrate Bible Sunday – a day on which we are asked to give thanks for the freedom we have to own a Bible, and to read and study it in safety, both in the privacy of our homes, and openly in public worship. We are encouraged to remember and pray for Christians across the world for whom owning or reading a Bible can mean punishment, persecution or even death.

But in the very particular situation in which we find ourselves, we could today also give thanks that throughout the Bible's narrative of a people seized with a passion for God, we can find the promise of hope.

The Bible has sustained men and women in terrible and terrifying situations across the centuries. History books are full of Tudor churchmen and politicians awaiting their execution in the Tower and turning to the pages of Scripture to comfort and strengthen them. More recently, Terry Waite, who spent four years as a hostage in solitary confinement in Lebanon with no books or distractions, spoke afterwards of how he had been encouraged and protected from mental breakdown by reciting the Psalms.

The timeless words of the most familiar Psalms: "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want", or "My help comes from the Lord; who has made Heaven and Earth", Or Christ's promise, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid," can offer us spiritual relief in our darkest times. Yet Scripture is not simply there, a bit like Paracetamol, to be a healing resource when we are in difficulty. It is a collection of texts filled with intensity and excitement, with drama and poetry which can inspire us every day of our lives.

The Bible doesn't always get a great press as a page-turner.

Many churches and theological viewpoints have centred their teaching around the reflections and instructions of St Paul, rather than around the open-ended stories which leave us to spend time reflecting and wondering, and which were favoured by Jesus himself

in his own teaching. Paul was undeniably an extraordinary and courageous man, whose own story, as told by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles, also makes amazing reading, packed with trials, imprisonments, miracles, shipwrecks, snake attacks and so on. In his reflections on the life and death of Christ; he assumes that his readers will be well versed in the stories and poetry of the Old Testament, and quotes from many of them to support his understanding of God's work in Christ. But phrases such as that from our second reading, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom," have so often left Christians and church authorities with the impression that the Bible is there as a tool for admonishing and correction, rather than a source of inspiration, mystery and hope.

Throughout the pages of Scripture, we encounter perennial human situations and feelings which continue to have relevance to our lives today – stories of plague and natural disaster, of war and conflict, of national identity and power struggles, personal tales of families and friendship, of rejoicing and thanksgiving.

Although we may feel that what we are facing today is a brand-new situation, the Biblical narrative reminds us that such events are scattered throughout history, and yet, throughout them all, God's hope and love and mercy may be discerned. If we are able to immerse ourselves within God's Word, we will perhaps be comforted to remember we are held within the wide sweep of God's eternity, or, as Hildegard von Bingen expressed it, "as feathers on the breath of God".

Every morning at 9 am, a group of up to twelve of us gather together on Zoom to say Morning Prayer together. Please do contact Mother Alice or me if you would like to join us. The service includes the reading of both an Old Testament and a New Testament text. These are rather longer than the passages we hear at a Sunday Eucharist, and the intention is that we read or hear the whole of the New Testament over the course of one year, and the whole of the Old Testament over three years.

We share together in the reading of countless gripping tales: some are funny or ironic, some are heartrending, but all provide insightful glimpses into the workings of the human psyche. There is great wisdom, too, but only as we read the stories, poetry and teaching and are led to reflect more deeply on our own position.

In our first reading, we heard how Ezra the scribe read in the Square in Jerusalem from the Book of the Law, (the first five books of our Old Testament), "from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand, and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law."

In the frenzy of life, we often fail in our desire to open our ears and our hearts to the Word of God. The Bible is our most holy text; it is a book of great power, and this Bible Sunday, I commend it to you especially as a source of hope and inspiration.