

Trinity 20 2021

Isaiah 55:1-11, 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5, John 5:36b-end

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How many of you enjoyed scripture classes at school, or whatever they were called where you were? I have to say, I really didn't. I'm not quite sure why. Perhaps because I didn't particularly enjoy drawing as a child, and our scripture classes at primary school seemed to consist of hearing about Jesus's miracles, most of which I thought were inherently unlikely, and then drawing the key part of the story. Aside from my not particularly liking drawing, there was no sense of thinking about what the stories represented, what they meant, what the faith was about; who Jesus was and is.

I think for too many people that is the case; and, for those who go to church, it may be tempting to think that we hear enough of the bible here, so why bother reading it for ourselves at home. I am not here today to tell you off for not reading the bible more.

But our readings today remind us of some of the richness of scripture. And our readings from the Second Letter to Timothy and from St John's gospel both remind us how scripture was viewed by early Christians: no Old and New Testament of course; for them scripture only meant the Hebrew Bible. So we have St Paul and St John writing about their own view of scripture, not thinking of what they wrote as scripture, but writing with the Jewish understanding of Torah, the Law, and the other books of the Tanakh as making up their holy books. The Christian bible as we know it only became fixed as that in the fourth century, after many years of debate and fluidity around what should be included.

A little confusing perhaps, but as we delve through these many layers, so we enter more deeply into our understanding of God, and how He has acted in the world. We do not believe that scripture was divinely dictated, as Muslims generally do of the Quran for example, but that those who wrote its books were divinely inspired. That does not mean that other writings aren't also inspired by God, but it does mean that these writings, which make up our Bible are uniquely so.

Similarly, we do not believe that our scriptures give us a straightforward rule book for life. All scripture needs interpretation, which is something Jesus spent much of His time doing in His teaching. We cannot simply take individual lines of scripture and apply them in isolation.

We need to understand the greater purpose and intention behind particular texts. Aside from anything else, if we try to read them in isolation they often seem to contradict each other. 'Who is not for us is against us' we hear Jesus say in one place. In another, 'Who is not *against* us is for us.' This is largely I think because Jesus always addressed what He said very specifically to the situation and needs of His audience, whether one individual or a crowd.

And alongside that, we can only understand what we read in the Bible if we understand something of the context, something of the culture in which it is set.

What of Paul's writings, for example, is simply a reflection of the society in which he lived, and what, on the other hand, was at the heart of what he was trying to say? Those who seek to use isolated texts in Paul's letters, for example in arguing against women being in positions of authority in the church, or against same-sex relationships, often don't follow him in other places, for example by ensuring that women always cover their head while praying.

That is not to say that you have to agree with my take on Paul's teaching, but you do, I think, have to inhabit the text and the context before interpreting it.

Our reading from Isaiah tells us to '*Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.*' Rich food has to be cogitated slowly, and digested. If we do not, we make the word of God our own word, rather than His. '*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.*' We see this is Jesus's confrontation with the devil in the wilderness. Both the devil and Jesus trade texts from Hebrew scripture with each other.

How could the devil be wrong when he says to Jesus, while trying to tempt Him to throw Himself off the roof of the Temple, that it is written that God will command His angels concerning Him, and they will lift you up so that you do not strike your foot against a stone? The devil is after all quoting scripture.

Well, because that is not how scripture works. Once again, we have to inhabit it, to pray into it. And so, Jesus answers, again from scripture, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' Both passages as applied cannot be right, and yet Jesus understands that the devil is misusing scripture, for his own purposes rather than God's. Both his intention, and his use, out of context, make his use wrong.

So how do we know whether we are using scripture properly, or well? You may not be surprised that I think Jesus is the answer. Rather than simply being given a string of stories about Jesus, in them we are given the person of Jesus. We feel as though we know Him through the picture we build up, and we receive His body and His blood in the Eucharist of course.

St Paul touches on this in 2 Timothy, where he says that '*from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation, through faith in Christ Jesus*', even though by sacred writings he was only referring to the Hebrew Bible, which obviously doesn't mention Jesus by name. And Jesus tells us in John's gospel that the same texts '*testify on my behalf. ... If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me.*'

On one level this is saying that the Hebrew Bible prophesies about Jesus, but as the person in whom the Law comes together, who Jesus is for us becomes the key to interpreting scripture. If we do that, then we are not simply imposing our own prejudices and views.

There is of course still a danger that our view of Jesus may be shaped partly by our prejudices, but that is all the more reason to inhabit scripture, to live within it, rather than to impose our own mind on it. And the only answer to how to do that is to practice good ways of reading. Regular reading, yes – and Pat has some great material from the Bible Reading Fellowship to help with that; and indeed, we read together in our Zoom Morning Prayer group and weekly Bible study, which all of you are invited to join.

But there are also different ways of reading. Try *lectio divina* for example, holy reading. This is an ancient monastic practice of reading a short passage very slowly, and then sitting with it in silence, and repeating this a couple more times to see which phrases speak to us. And enjoy the bible. Aside from the variety of books, it is a living thing, for the word of God is alive in it, sharper than any two edged sword, as St Paul has it. If it were not, we could just write one sermon on each bit of the gospels, and never have to write another. And yet both Mother Emma and I sit with each week's texts, with you all in our prayers, to discern what we think God might be saying through them, to us, with all our longings and our pains.

Some weeks we do better than others.

But let the Holy Spirit breathe life into the bible for you, and let God speak to you through the hidden depths of His word.

*'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts,' says the Lord. 'For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.'* Amen