

Bible Sunday, Matins
2 Kings 22 & Colossians 3: 12-17
The Rev'd Emma Dinwiddy-Smith

Bible Sunday is set aside for us to give thanks for the Scriptures which lie at the heart of Christian faith and practice, and to rejoice in the inspiration and comfort they bring. We are also asked to remember all those who do not have the privilege of readily available Bibles, and who risk imprisonment or persecution if they are found with one.

The Collect for this day exhorts us to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest God's holy Word, but I wonder how often, despite our easy access to any number of different translations and media versions of the Bible, we find ourselves a bit embarrassed to admit either that we regularly read the Scriptures, or in other contexts, that we don't?!

Perhaps you hesitate to confess to the Vicar that your regular Bible reflection is limited to Sundays, little imagining that clergy themselves struggle amidst the frenetic round of parish administration to find time to study the Scriptures as much as they would wish – or would want their Bishop to think!

On the other hand, outside the Church, people often worry that admitting to reading the Bible will change the ways others see them, making them seem less normal, or fun, or forgiving. When I ran a Bible Study for a group of women in their thirties some years ago, one of them once asked, "Do you think you could NOT mention the Bible in the email title when you send us information about the group, in case someone at work sees it? I usually put 'wine-tasting' in my diary instead."

Whenever I preach on Bible Sunday, I wonder what it is that makes reading this wonderful text into something done in secret or explained apologetically away. And then, perhaps I look at the readings set for the day, and I begin to understand why those who glance through the Bible, or who only hear short extracts taken out of context may miss the joy and inspiration, hope and comfort of God's Word.

The story in our Old Testament reading referred to the discovery of a religious book, hidden in the walls of the Temple and discovered when, following Babylonian attacks on Jerusalem, the new young and righteous King, Josiah, orders the repair of the Temple.

This book is thought variously to have been the Book of Deuteronomy, or a newly written or edited version of it, which repeats and clarifies the religious laws given to Moses in the wilderness, to form the heart of the Israelites' social and religious practice. Josiah is told that it is the failure of the people of Israel to read or to follow this Book which has led to God's anger and led him to allow the conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. We read elsewhere how Josiah set about encouraging the Book to be read aloud in the public square to draw those listening back to obedience of God's law. This, alongside Josiah's own personal piety, resulted in an overhaul of both the religious practice and the everyday laws of his kingdom. But our extract today centres primarily on the sense that God was angry because the Israelites had neither read nor kept his law as laid down in the Book. Although he does relent and promise Josiah that he will personally be spared the experience of Jerusalem's destruction, God is portrayed as demanding and vengeful, and the Law as something to be obeyed out of the fear of terrible consequences.

Passages like these have been employed throughout the centuries – and still sometimes are - to encourage the subjugation of others to religious laws by making them afraid.

This has led to a common perception (much supported by the Victorians and more literal Bible readers today) that the Bible is there simply to dictate our behaviour within narrow and tightly prescribed limits, and to point to divine punishment if we step outside them. (This may explain our reluctance to share with our friends or work colleagues the fact we enjoy reading it!)

But such interpretations fail to consider either the fact that the writers of the Scriptures were interpreting the disasters they saw around them in a particular way which we might see differently today, and more importantly, that Jesus came to bring in a new Law – that of Love and Grace and Forgiveness. Interpreted through the lens of Christ's teaching, the Scriptures reveal a much clearer picture of God – no longer vengeful, but a Father longing to reach out to us in love, to draw us tenderly back to him, rather than punishing us for our failures.

Yet the New Testament, too, stresses the importance of our studying God's Word. Our reading from Colossians encouraged us, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs."

There is still a place for God's Word to remind us what is asked of his followers, but in the belief that our faith in Christ will lead us to want to become imitators of him. The Bible was written by people seized with an overwhelming passion for the God they had encountered in their own lives, and who wanted to share that with others, to inspire and encourage.

We should not read the Bible out of fear, whether of God's vengeance or of admitting to the Vicar or others that we fail to do so, but rather out of a longing to come closer to God himself.

The Psalmist in Psalm 19 which we heard today declared: "I have had as great delight in the way of thy testimonies as in all manner of riches." The Bible is a source of endless hope, comfort and inspiration, and my prayer for you is that you may find yourselves drawn again and again, perhaps not simply to odd passages like the one we heard today, but to the poetry, the teaching and the story upon which our faith is built.

Christ came to open God's Word to us; to bring us closer to understanding God's majesty and his love for us, and as we encounter him week by week in the Sacrament, so may we also encounter God day by day in the pages of his Holy Scriptures.