

Bible Sunday, Matins

Isaiah 55: 1-11, Luke 4: 14-30

Mother Emma

Many regular churchgoers may question the need for a Sunday designated “Bible Sunday” – after all, what do we expect in church but to hear about the Bible?

The tradition of having a Sunday specifically dedicated to thinking about the place of the Scriptures in our daily lives, to supporting the distributing of Bibles abroad, and to praying for those for whom a Bible is a much longed-for but forbidden item, was first established in 1915 by the American Bible Society. It is maintained today in our liturgies by the International Bible Society, and so this morning, our readings and reflections draw our attention to the glory and the power of the Word of God, so easily accessible to us, and so craved by others across the world.

In our first reading, the prophet Isaiah speaks of the Word of God as drink to satisfy the thirsty, food to nourish the hungry, inspiration to make the soul sing and a gift like the rain from heaven which brings forth fruit from the earth. It is not a dry, static thing caught between the pages of ancient books, but the source of constant mercy, hope, inspiration, challenge and purpose which flows from the mouth of God. Many of us in this country will own, not one, but several Bibles.

But how often do we treat this abundance of Scripture with the reverence and awe due to the life-giving words of our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer? Do we regard the Word of God as an imperative for the way we live our lives, a source of comfort and challenge for us as we encounter the joys and sorrows of the world, or do we downplay its importance?

Our Gospel reading this morning unusually describes Jesus visiting a place of worship (his local synagogue at Nazareth) and taking part in the liturgy, by reading and interpreting Scripture in such a way that his hearers are first astonished and moved, and then enraged. Not for them the chance to allow the words to wash over them as they sit peacefully in their pews, perhaps occasionally wondering what is for lunch or surreptitiously checking their phones(!)

This is the beginning of **Jesus’** ministry; his first spoken words in the Gospel of Luke, and his only recorded teaching in the context of public worship, expressing what might be seen as the essence of his calling and mission, and defined by the prophetic words of Isaiah which he comes to fulfil. For Jesus, the Word of God as recorded in Scripture, is the springboard for action in God’s world.

The passage also confronts preachers, who have to take full responsibility for addressing God’s Word in ways which lull their hearers and fail to challenge or inspire. It is a passage often chosen by newly appointed parish incumbents to be the Gospel reading at their licensing, reminding them of the daunting, but inspiring calling which following Christ implies for all of us, lay and ordained, as we seek to share the core message of our faith with others.

My very first class on preaching, when I was training as a licensed lay minister twenty years ago, a class given by the priest who would later become my Training Incumbent, was based on this very Gospel passage. The thrust of his teaching concluded: *“Preaching in the New Testament is about proclaiming, announcing and declaring the good news.”* As we reflect on the meaning of God’s Holy

Word for us today, how could we better hear the call to all Christians to share the good news, than in Jesus' chosen text from Isaiah:

*'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor.
He hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted,
To preach deliverance to the captive and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty them that are bruised,
to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.'*

Following his baptism in the Jordan and the temptation in the wilderness, Jesus has returned to Nazareth filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, driven to share the good news of the coming of God's kingdom far and wide. His message, as throughout the Gospels, draws on and illuminates the Word of God in Scripture - proclaiming that the arrival of the Kingdom through his incarnation will bring joy, release and freedom to all those held captive by poverty, society, infirmity, war or injustice. In place of the wrath of God in the face of disobedience which is often associated with the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus points to a new interpretation which would demonstrate the compassionate and redemptive love of the Father.

The people in the Nazareth synagogue, living as they were under Roman occupation, perhaps initially heard in Jesus' preaching that God was coming to free **them** from foreign rule and the financial and social injustices which went with it. But when Jesus continues by rebuking them for expecting first and foremost healing, miracles and release for themselves, rather than understanding that the good news of the Kingdom is to be shared with the poor, the foreigner and the outcast, they become angry and resentful.

We should remember that hearing the Word of God contained in the Bible, even the King James Version(!) is not simply to experience its beauty. There is no doubt that we should hear in Jesus' words to the synagogue congregation a message of hope, forgiveness, and freedom. We can find such messages in the pages of Scripture, and in times of great darkness and uncertainty, they will bring us comfort. Yet alongside our desire for comfort and hope, the Scriptures should stir us to deeper reflection and greater action; they may surprise and challenge or even shock us, forcing us out of our comfort zone and into a place in which we actively serve the living God in our daily lives. In turning to God's Word this Bible Sunday to encourage and galvanise us, we can live out God's prophecy through Isaiah:

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.