

Sunday 27 October 2024, Bible Sunday Parish Eucharist
The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams

It being both half-term and Bible Sunday, I thought I'd do something a bit different. I have here some bibles, three to be exact. These bibles represent three periods in my life, and what I want to share with you is the role the bible has played in my life over the years.

First is 'A Child's Story Bible' by Catherine Vos. Now, strictly speaking this isn't a bible but a paraphrase. Unlike most children's bibles today, this one actually covers most of the bible and, as Mrs Vos was the wife of a professor of theology, it contains very insightful questions as part of the text. As you can see, a significant portion of that text is the Old Testament. I loved the Old Testament as a child and I still do today. It's full of fantastic stories: battles and heroic last stands, soap-operaesque family dramas, intrigues and assassinations, angelic appearances and strange prophecies. Children have always loved heroes and blood-and-guts and good triumphing over evil, and the Old Testament has that in spades. This bible shaped my faith and my love of scripture, and it prepared me to engage with the whole bible as an adult.

Now it wasn't just this book, of course, but my parents' use of it. They were consistent in reading a chapter to me every night; it was part of our routine as a family. Dinner, clearing up, and a bible story before bed. Every night, without fail. If one of my parents had to be out in the evening, the other read the story. You see, they had decided that, like brushing my teeth and making me eat some vegetables, knowing the bible was good for me. They believed they knew what was healthy for me- spiritually- and they raised me accordingly. And how right they were, because here I am. I wonder if I would have continued to be a Christian if they hadn't taught me the faith as a child?

This second bible is, as you can see, rather smaller and I confess to rarely using it now because the print is tiny. My parents gave me this bible on my 20th birthday. It was then the newish translation called the English Standard Version or ESV. Twenty is, naturally an age for university. And university is, naturally, an age for questions. According to research published by the Pew Research Center, 31% of people raised Christian leave the faith between ages 15 and 29. Thirty-one percent! That's absolutely staggering. But what isn't staggering are the reasons given for leaving: among the most common responses are 'lack of clarity in biblical teaching' and 'a shallow experience of Christianity'. In others words, those young adults who left the faith weren't very deeply rooted in it to begin with. They weren't taught the bible, weren't allowed (or shall we say prompted) to ask deep questions, and weren't shown by their parents that Christianity was important or meaningful for life.

This bible represents my parents' continued interest in the development of my faith and their belief that the bible should be central to that faith. They gave me this bible because they expected me to read it. And I did read it, though I have never been able to bring myself to write in it, unlike my partner whose bible is covered in notes and highlighted passages, and littered with post-it bookmarks.

Finally, the third bible. And isn't she a beauty? This is a Cambridge Paragraph Bible, King James Version, with Apocrypha. And no red letters! I was most particular about that. Some of you may have seen bibles with the words of Jesus printed in red throughout the New Testament. To me, this has always implied that somehow the words attributed to Jesus were more important, more 'the Word of God' than the rest of the bible. I can't bring myself to see it that way, so I was delighted to be able to find a bible where all the text is reassuringly black. A paragraph bible is exactly what it says on the tin: a bible printed in paragraphs. If you go home and check your own bibles, you'll probably find a text printed in two columns on each page. It's a very distinct kind of printing. It also makes the bible feel less like an ordinary book. What I like about this bible is that it allows my eyes to pass across a page with the same rhythm as any other book I might be reading. In a subtle way, it normalises the act of bible reading, makes it less 'other' among daily activities.

This last bible is the one I actually read when I'm on my own. I prop it up on a book stand on my desk. What I've been doing lately is reading the bible in chronological order, that is the order in which scholars think the books were written. This is not always the order in which we find them printed in our bibles. This has allowed me to experience a familiar text in a new way, and those of you who attended Matins when we recently preached through parts of the book of Job will remember how placing Job at the beginning of the bible rather than Genesis rather changes the narrative of man's relationship with God.

It won't surprise you to know that I think the bible is important, or that I think you should read it. I hope what looking at these three bibles in the context of my life has shown is that the bible is a book for all seasons. It is a book, or library of books, that can capture the imagination of a child and open up a dialogue about God's relationship with the world. It's a book for the expanding and wilful mind of a twenty-something, one who needs above all else an anchor in a stormy period of life and growth. And it's a book for an adult trying to do his best to know what the will of God is and how to live well in accordance with that will. I won't tell you that the bible is my favourite book, but I can assure you that it is the most important book I've ever read and it's one I can return to again and again. It never fails to surprise and to challenge, and in it I always hear the voice of the one who spoke the universe into being and who sent his own Son to be the saviour of the world. Amen.