Sunday Morning Resources

27th October 2019, Bible Sunday

Lectionary Readings (depending on the kind of service you are leading, you may use one or more of the following readings – however, you must use the gospel reading, as this is what the homily is based on)

Isaiah 45.22-end
Ps 119.129-136
Romans 15.1-6
Luke 4.16-24

Homily

Today’s homily has been written by Rev’d Canon Mike Booker, Bishop’s Change Officer for Market Towns

Why do Christians take the Bible so seriously? It might seem that the world we live in is too complicated, too fast-moving, for the Bible’s ancient words to be relevant to us now. And more to the point, why should we attach such great weight to the written words of the Bible anyway – isn’t being a Christian really about following Jesus, not about the Bible?

Our Gospel reading is all about Jesus, and as Christians, we most certainly are followers of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. But, Jesus himself was someone who followed. He followed the call of God, and was obedient to that call, as it was laid out in the Hebrew Scriptures, those books of the Bible which Christians refer to as the Old Testament.

Christians take the Bible seriously, and have always taken the Bible seriously, because Jesus stands right at the centre of it. Like every one of his Jewish contemporaries, Jesus would have grown up knowing, hearing, and learning, the words of the Bible. Study of God’s law, and love for that law, as laid out in the Hebrew Scriptures, would have led Jesus and his contemporaries, to echo the words of today’s Psalm:

Psalm 119:131 - With open mouth I pant, because I long for your commandments.
That’s a significant image. The Psalmist is ‘longing’ for God’s commandments in the same way we long for food and drink, if we are hungry or thirsty. We can get by without a meal, maybe without several. At first, we may not notice anything, but a longer period without eating or drinking means that we will start to suffer. So, it is with the Bible – it can be easy to ignore the Bible, to assume we remember what it’s about, but quietly and imperceptibly to discover that we are getting spiritually hungry, becoming weaker in our faith. Jesus knew that, and was fed by, shaped by, and steeped in, the words of the Bible.

The message of the Bible is not there merely to be studied, or even to be believed in theory. The Bible, as we are shaped and transformed by the truth it conveys, equips us to live. In the sentences before the Gospel reading that we heard this morning, Jesus had been wrestling against the devil’s temptations. To each lie, each challenge laid down by his enemy, Jesus replied: “It is written….,” Jesus took, as his authority, the teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures, declared it as truth, and was ready to hold on to that truth in the face of temptations to change direction out of fear, pride or self-interest. Now, in our Gospel reading, when Jesus takes the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah, and reads from it, His message is clear – God’s word in the Bible is to be followed in action, not only in theory. In Jesus that action became a reality in the fullest possible way. Jesus saw his whole ministry as following the words of the prophets, and the commands of God, in the Bible.

If we take Jesus seriously, we have to take the Bible seriously as well.

Jesus looks back to, and affirms the authority of, the Old Testament of the Bible, but he also looks forward. In Jesus, the words of the Old Testament are fulfilled. They are fully lived out, fully understood, and fully revealed. In the teaching, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus - the Good News (that’s the literal meaning of ‘gospel’) of God’s love, is made clear in a new way. Jesus passed on that Good News to his disciples, and, told them to proclaim it to every nation. As disciples, committed to passing on their master’s teaching faithfully, those disciples, and those who became their close associates did just that. Recorded in the books that now make up the New Testament, the message of Jesus was proclaimed by those he sent out. It bears the authority of the Master who commissioned his followers to carry on his task.

In the Old Testament of the Bible we read, with Jesus, the words that enthralled, guided and shaped him. In the New Testament we read the message of Jesus, laid out in the words of those who encountered the direct power of all that Jesus came to teach and to do. In the whole of the Bible, we discover the voice of God, speaking to us now as that voice has spoken to believers in every generation.
So, if the authority of Jesus gives us a pressing reason to take the Bible seriously, we need to take action. Pride of place on a bookshelf, or even downloading the Bible as an app on our smartphone, good though both things are, will not in themselves help us to access all that the Bible has to give. In the words of the collect for Bible Sunday, our need is to ‘read, mark, learn and inwardly digest’ the Scriptures.

Reading is the starting point. Some parts are best read quickly, in one sitting, like some of the stories of the Old Testament, or one of St Paul’s shorter letters. More often, it’s best to read only a little of the Bible, but to do so regularly so that we become familiar with the words.

‘Marking’ the Bible just possibly might involve making a note in the margin when something really strikes us. Usually, though, it’s not something to do in a literal way. It’s more often a question of stopping to notice something, reading it again, thinking it through, taking time to think what it means for us now. That’s what Jesus did when he saw the application of the ancient words of the Prophet Isaiah to the start of his own ministry.

Learning is important too. We will not always have the Bible to hand, and may not remember exactly where we found some of the most helpful words, but the more we have learned and remembered, the more those words will be at hand when we need them, in a crisis, or at a moment when we’re faced with a particularly difficult decisions. But finally – and here’s some real encouragement for us as we look to the week ahead – the Bible is to be ‘inwardly digested’. It changes us, strengthens us, without us necessarily understanding everything that’s going on. We may not understand how our Sunday lunch is going to strengthen us, but so long as we digest it, then it’s going to do so! So it is with the Bible. The more we live with, and take in, the Bible, the more it changes us, strengthens us, re-shapes the way we view the world and the way we act. That’s some significant encouragement when our own understanding will not always help us make immediate sense of every detail we read.

So, this Bible Sunday, we thank God again for all the wonder and the riches of the Bible. We take the Bible seriously, because Jesus stands at the centre of it, and marks it with his authority. But most importantly, we remember to take the words of our Collect seriously, and to ‘read, mark, learn and inwardly digest’ all of the good things God has revealed to us in that most precious book.
**Suggested intercessions**

For determination and perseverance in reading, marking, learning, and inwardly digesting the Scriptures, in our personal lives, and as a church.

For everybody who is studying the Bible as part of their training – ALMs, LLMs and those preparing for ordination. For everybody involved in teaching, that they would be able to communicate how wonderful the Bible is.

For everybody involved in making the Bible accessible to children and young people, both in church groups and schools.

For people who find it hard to be able to read the Bible. For those in countries like North Korea and Saudi Arabia, where the Bible is not available, and for people who would love to own a Bible but cannot afford one. Pray for all those involved in making Bibles available worldwide, in print and online.

**Suggested hymns/songs**

Hymns:

- How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord
- Break Thou the bread of life, dear Lord, to me (Lathbury)
- I will sing the wondrous story (Rowley)
- Master, speak, They servant heareth (Havergal)
- God has spoken by the prophets (Briggs)

Songs:

- Thy word is a lamp unto my feet (Amy Grant)
- Word of God, speak (MercyMe)
- Every Promise (Stuart Townend)
Ideas for all-age worship

Explain that the Bible is a library, not just one book. It’s got all types of writing in it – stories, poems, history, laws, letters and much more. It’s all important, and all inspired by God. But it’s not all the same, in the way it is written, or in the way we should read it. In a way, if the Bible is going to help us grow strong as Christians, it’s helpful to think of it as containing different parts of a balanced diet.

Some shopping items in a bag can help explain that:

Chocolate – it’s delicious, and makes life altogether better, but you can’t live on chocolate alone. Get to know your favourite verses or stories, and be encouraged by them, but be ready to take up the hard work of getting a full and healthy diet by getting to know all the Bible.

Cheese – makes us strong, with protein for muscles and calcium for bones. The Bible makes us stronger as Christians, and helps us live God’s way.

Chewy granary bread – it’s good for us, but we have to work at it. Not all the Bible is easy to read, but it’s worth chewing away because it’s good for us. Some bits are hard to understand, and some have lots of detail in them. We can’t bolt them down quickly, and need to take the time to understand some of the harder parts of the Bible. It’s worth the effort, though.

Marmite – some people love it, some people hate it! Don’t be surprised if we find some bits of the Bible hard to cope with. It’s challenging, and we might need to read the more difficult bits in very small amounts. And don’t be surprised if we find we disagree with others about some of what’s in the Bible.

Dog food – it’s good, nutritious, and important for ‘somebody’ else, but maybe not all directly for us. Some parts of the Bible may not apply directly to our own lives now, or may be less significant for us than they are for Christians in other places or at other times (an example might be some of the lists of genealogies, which mattered a lot when people needed to know who somebody was descended from, but might not be so significant to us). They are still important – but it’s not all about us!