

The Rector's Sermon

Bible Sunday - 24th October 2021

One of my favourite operas is Gershwin's Porgy and Bess. One of the characters, Sporting Life, quite a nuanced villain in the opera, is given one of the big show numbers, "It ain't necessarily so," which includes the line 'the things that you read all about in the Bible, it ain't necessarily so'. It maybe is a bit disconcerting that this was the song that came to mind when I was thinking what to write for Bible Sunday!

We hear portions of the Bible in church each week, we read our bibles at home, occasionally we might have to swear on it, holding it on our right hand as a test that what we are saying is really true. In fact, there's a rather nice story about an elderly lady who had to go to a solicitor's office to swear and affidavit about something, and when she was due, they couldn't find the office bible anywhere. But someone had a copy of the Oxford English Dictionary, so they took the paper cover off and it looked a dark blue sober volume, so she was handed that to use, which she did, and they thought, phew! Couple of days later a small, wrapped parcel is handed in to reception and when they open it, they find a nice new copy of the King James bible.

On most Sundays there will be passages that we love to hear, passages that we puzzle over, stories that we can remember, and bits where we want to bang the book shut in fury and exclaim as once happened "This??? Is the word of the Lord!?"

For me, "The Word of the Lord" has never been about the words on the page. Christianity has never regarded scripture as the dictated word of God, but the inspired word of God – and there is a difference. Many Muslims would regard the Koran as the dictated word of God, hence the careful way they look after the actual book and treat it with reverence, never putting it on the floor, for example. The way we treat our bibles is a lot more cavalier and familiar, and a really well used bible will have scuffed edges, the odd coffee stain, and probably quite a few pencil marks in the text. That is no disrespect, it is a sign that it has been well used.

We know that actual the words are of course a translation from Hebrew and Greek, in some cases a translation from a translation! They are the work of scholars and theologians over several centuries, attuning themselves to God as they perceived him. But their ability to reveal the purposes of God was limited by their own cultural and national limitations, and so we cannot deny that there are some passages which come across to our generation as cruel and heartless – for example those of parts of the Old Testament that describe the way the Israelites on the march through Canaan slaughtered the tribes as they went. Some passages cannot be for us The Word of the Lord.

Our Bible is Literature, laws, letters, stories, dreams. It's a whole library between hard covers. So when we read it, we almost need different lenses, to look at it; the way we read Leviticus (assuming that one would – though I sometimes wonder why) is different from the way we read a Gospel, and the way we read the Psalms is different again from an Epistle. Parts of the Old Testament date from the Bronze age, and yet we are reading it in the age of smart phones and twitter. When it comes to the Epistles, (which are a bit like reading somebody else's post) we almost have to do historical sociology before we can make sense of what is being said and why; and so many of the stories, both those about Jesus and other people too, circulated by word of mouth for some years before they were written down, and those who wrote them down were not trying to be historians or biographers, but creating a narrative (as it says at the end of Chapter 20 in St John's Gospel) so that people would hear and come to believe.

Its message is continually unfolding through the work of academics, archaeologists, and theologians. But at the same time, it is unfolding in our lives as well as we engage with these texts and find in them a message which shapes our lives, challenges us to change, comforts us in distress and brings us hope and identity. For us, the central person is Jesus and if it wasn't for our faith in him, we probably wouldn't be engaging with it at all, and as Marcus Borg, a biblical theologian from the States, put it so well – Jesus is the lens through which we read the scriptures. We believe in a person and not a book, but it is through the book that we greater understand Jesus and we greater understand our relationship with Jesus and with one another, but the bible is not Jesus and we follow Jesus.

So today we give thanks for the Bible, we give thanks for those who God inspired to commit the words to parchment, we give thanks for those who protected the scrolls over those early and vulnerable years, we remember those who in the early centuries deliberated over which books to include. We give thanks for those who translated it into English, and in many cases suffered great cruelty from the state and the church in order that this could be done. And still the work of translation goes on as languages are discovered into which there has yet been no translation. And we give thanks for those who make the bible available, for example the Gideon society who place bibles in hotel rooms and give them out to schools, we give thanks for the ready availability of the Bible which is greater for us now than ever before through the internet, and bible apps on phones.

It's very available – but do we actually read it? Not going to put anyone on the spot here, but if it's been some time since we did actually read it very much (apart from hearing the readings in church) can I commend us a little task as we prepare for Advent (we've got a month). And that's to take a gospel and just read it through, like a novel. Mark is 16 chapters, Luke is 24, Matthew is 28 and John is 21; so that's easily a chapter a day between now and Advent Sunday. Or we could look ahead to Advent and for the 24 days of our Advent Calendar, starting on the 1st of December, read a Chapter of Luke's Gospel. A chapter a day will bring us to Christmas Eve.

If we manage to do this, it will be a very positive way of preparing for Christmas Day, reminding us of what the baby did when he grew up, and what Jesus is for each one of us, in this world and the next. Amen.