

A Sermon for Bible Sunday

This Sunday is Bible Sunday, so I want to reflect a little on what the bible means for each one of us, and to invite us all to be honest with ourselves about how important, or unimportant, the bible is to us in our own faith journey.

Just a few weeks ago the world's most powerful leader was seen using the bible as a prop for a quick photo opportunity outside St. John's Episcopal Church in Washington DC. He had just delivered a speech, having first had the streets cleared of people protesting the brutal murder of a black man by the police. In his speech, President Trump proclaimed that he would be bringing in the National Guard to 'dominate the streets' should what he deemed to be an unjustifiably violent protest continue. The whole incident has come to be seen as one of the most flagrant violations of civil liberties in recent American history and a defining moment of Trump's presidency.

The photo op which followed gave the bible totemic significance. The bible was being used as a visual aid to convey the 'truth' of what Trump stood for, and its rightness or, to employ a more biblical term its 'righteousness'. It was being used in the service of a lie, even though it was especially aimed at his own political power base, the American conservative Evangelical Right.

While it is easy to condemn Donald Trump, who perhaps acted in ignorance as much as out of vanity, for using the bible in this way, Christians are often heard doing something similar. We all use the bible to justify our opinions and actions from time to time. The bible makes it quite easy for us to 'pick and mix', to hurl conflicting texts at one another in arguments and in debates over issues that matter to us.

How then is the bible to be read?

It helps to remember perhaps that the bible is not a single book written by one author. It is a library of books written over the course of a few hundred years and edited in various places to fit the circumstances of the day, most notably those of exile and persecution. There is a whole section of the library devoted to poetry and another to the chronological history of the kingdoms of the north and south, Judah and Israel. Much of the bible was written with the benefit of hindsight. Its prophecies are as much about lessons to be learned from the past as about things that will take place in the future. Christians will read much of the Old Testament as prophecy pointing to the coming of Christ and, in this respect, we would do well to bear in mind that many Jews find our way of interpreting their scriptures problematic.

All of this makes us wonder at times what we mean when, at the end of a reading, the reader says "This is the word of the Lord". Does God speak to us directly through the bible? I think he does, when we read it wisely. Note that I say wisely and not correctly. Wisdom is not a matter of one line of argument, or set of facts, being deployed in a battle to 'win' the argument and thereby prove something. The bible should be read with reverent wisdom because Wisdom, or *Sophia*, is not only a central tenet of scripture, but a name for God.

So when we say these words at the end of a reading, do we mean that what we have read is to be taken, along with everything else in the bible as true in a literal sense, as provable and undeniable fact? Or does faith require that we swallow whole bits of the bible that are clearly unethical, if not downright evil, in the light of today's scientific knowledge and social mores, along with anything that history may have taught us? For example, should we see God as in favour of child sacrifice, when Abraham is asked to sacrifice Isaac, his young son? or of war, given the battles

he wins for his own people? Or are we being asked to revere a petty tyrant who is given to changing his mind on a whim when it comes to giving them his love and support? These are only some of the more difficult bits of the bible that the Church lectionary, on the whole, spares us from having to read. But they are there, all the same.

This returns me to the need to read the bible wisely. Wisdom, or *Sophia*, connotes life. The other word for it is the Hebrew *ruah* which means breath. The Word of the Lord which we hear read to us in church is the breath of life. Life brings movement, transformation and change.

The Word of the Lord, the Word of scripture, is therefore a living breathing thing, something that we must take into ourselves like oxygen. Jesus would have said that we are to 'munch' on it. The Greek word is *browsis* which roughly translates as 'chew the cud'. We are to nourish ourselves with it as if it were bread. But we do not take in the Word indiscriminately. We sift it for the deep truth it is speaking to us in these our own times, for the pearl without price, for the gift of understanding. We ask for this precious gift, as the psalmist does (Ps.119:34) that we might sense from within our hearts how we are to think and act in the world of today, keeping close to the living Word as we do so.

To keep close to the living Word is to judge what we read in the bible through the lens of compassion. This is how Jesus read and judged scripture in his conversations with the teachers of the law. The teachers of the law feared him because he was bringing a new and living truth concerning scripture and the law to the people whom they controlled. The people would immediately understand or, 'get' this truth, because it was rooted in compassion and it would set them free from the dead letter of the law which was used by the religious authorities to control them and extort money from them.

At the heart of the good news of the Gospel is a transformation of the way we think about scripture. It tells us in the words of the psalmist (Ps.119:174), that the law is for us to delight in, rather than a dead letter that seeks to control and suppress. The 'law' is the 'word of the Lord', a living word that empowers and sets us free from every kind of bondage.

As Christians, we have a responsibility in regard to this freedom. We are sent out not to convert people to thinking exactly as we do about everything the bible says, but to set them free from the things that bind them, even as we have been set free. The word of God, and salvation as it is brought to us in Christ, sets us free from old habits of mind and from the cold hearts that condition us to fear and hate people who are different from us. The living Word obliges us not only to re-examine, and possibly revise, the way we read scripture, but to be open and receptive to the wisdom we need in order to realise this freedom for ourselves and for the world.

Lorraine Cavanagh