

Sermon for 23rd October 2022

Last Sunday after Trinity: Bible Sunday

Isaiah 45: 22-25; Romans 15: 1-6; Luke 4:16 - 24

*O Lord, take our lips and speak through them;
Take our minds and think through them;
Take our hearts and set them on fire with love for You. Amen.*

Today, the lectionary gives us the option to observe 'Bible Sunday', an opportunity to consider the Bible as a whole: its history and its place in our worship and faith.

These days it is easy for us to obtain a Bible in printed form, or via the internet. We can read it in our preferred language, and it is easy to reference, and cross-reference, with all the books divided into chapters and verses. We rather take all this easy access for granted. It was not always like this, though.

It is only in the last 500 years that we have been able to print the Bible, divided into verses, on paper, a development that broadly coincided with the appearance of translations of the Bible into modern European languages. These developments contributed to the Reformation, turbulent times, when early translators were persecuted and executed for their efforts. Later still, the ability to read became more widespread, so private reading and study of the Bible became more possible. And in the last 40 years, dissemination through the internet has taken access to the Bible and to biblical scholarship to another level.

The original Biblical languages are Hebrew and Greek and the word 'Bible' comes from the Greek 'Ta Biblia', which means 'the books.' The Bible is an anthology of works written over a period of about 1,000 years, with some of the texts drawing on even earlier material. About two thirds of our Bibles are what we call the Old Testament, and Jewish people call the Hebrew Bible. These texts were originally handwritten on papyrus scrolls in Hebrew, and were translated into Greek two to three hundred years before Christ. The Greek translation is called the Septuagint, and was widely used by the time of Jesus. The remaining third is the New Testament, written in Greek, in a new form, called 'a codex' when vellum, or papyrus sheets were bound together. This was the precursor to the book, and was revolutionary at the time. The decisions about what was included in the anthology, and what left out was a process that continued until the early 5th century.

For well over 1,000 years the Biblical texts were copied by hand, and beautifully illuminated by the monks, onto parchment until the advent of paper and printing. The documents were preserved in the churches and monasteries, and read out by the priests in worship. They were sacred writings, and it is understandable that the move from handwriting to printing should have caused turmoil, not to mention the translation to modern languages, although the western Latin texts were already in translation.



Opening words of Matthew's Gospel, Lindisfarne Gospels, produced about 715 in Latin translation. It is of particular interest because notes in old Northern English were added to the pages in the early 900's, and so it could be seen as the first extant translation into English. It is usually kept in the British Library, but is currently in Newcastle. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lindisfarne_Gospels



Page from the Greek Codex Vaticanus from the 4th century. Note there are no verse divisions. <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/tools/image-gallery/c/codex-vaticanus>

Eventually, the easy access to the Bible for ordinary people led to the opening up of the theological debate, and, I think, to some remarkable insights into our faith. If you would like to follow up on any of this I have listed a few books at the end.

Reading the Books.

When we read an anthology we don't need to start at page 1, we pick out the sections that interest us most. For anyone coming to the Bible for the first time as an enquiring Christian, I would recommend starting with the writings of the New Testament, the works about Jesus.

The order in which the New Testament documents were written is:

1. The letters of Paul and some others
2. The Gospels and Acts of the Apostles
3. Some of the other letters and The Revelation of John.

Of course, the events described in the Gospels precede the letters of Paul, and the accounts contained in them would have been told and passed around in early Church circles, and in many cases will have come from eyewitnesses, but they weren't actually written down until later.

In her books 'Phoebe' and the newly published 'Lydia', the biblical theologian Paula Gooder paints a picture of how this process might have happened by writing a narrative based on the evidence found in the New Testament. I recommend these books.ⁱ The act of re-creative imagination based on the biblical evidence is what brings life to sometimes difficult texts.

The first proclamation about Jesus Christ was that he is risen from the dead. Paul developed this as he wrote his letters to the new churches – the core of his theology was that Christ has died, Christ is risen, the Holy Spirit lives in the Church, and that Christ will come again. Those who live in the Spirit are freed from the shackles of the Law and so can be accepting of how their neighbour wishes to live. Our passage from Romans is at the end of a section that points out that the Kingdom of God is not about what we might eat and drink (as in the food Laws), but in building up our neighbour. When Paul talks about 'the encouragement of Scriptures,' he is referring to the Hebrew Bible, which he says, points to our hope, and instructs our faith.

Turning to the gospels, among the theological developments of the last three centuries, was the recognition that there is a lot of overlap between the gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke. After a lot of careful study, in the 19th century the conclusion was reached that the first gospel to be written was Mark, and that both Matthew and Luke copied out large parts of his text. Copyright was not an issue in those days, and using material written by others

was commonplace. Further analysis of Matthew and Luke shows that they have other matching sections that have not come from Mark, and so the theory was developed that they had another common source, which has been designated as Q. This theory does not enjoy the same widespread support as the Markan priority theory, and one important contributor to the theological debate, who argued against it, was Michael Goulder.ⁱⁱ I mention him, because he had a connection with All Saints. He was an assistant priest here from 1966 to 1981, and some of you will remember him. He was a theologian of international status, and an engaging lecturer. What a privilege to have him as part of our ministry team! His sermons must have been very lively and informative. There is a chapter on 'All Saints, Kings Heath' in his book *'Five Stones and a Sling'*

So, in answer to our enquiring Christian, I would recommend reading the Gospel of Mark, the earliest and shortest gospel, as the starting point in reading the Bible. Reading Mark, or any of the biblical literature can leave us with questions. It isn't easy to read texts from two thousand years ago, when they had different world views, this is where turning to the careful analysis and debate of the biblical scholars, such as Paula Gooder and Michael Goulder is so helpful.

For example, the first three gospels are rather different from John's gospel, but where there is more common material is in the accounts of Jesus's passion and crucifixion. There is a theory that the origin of these chapters lies in the worship of the earliest Church, maybe a prayerful, narrative procession around the key places in Jerusalem, ending at the tomb with the proclamation 'he is not here, he is risen'ⁱⁱⁱ Our former archbishop Rowan Williams finds this theory 'persuasive.' I find it life-giving.

Our Gospel reading today is from Luke's gospel, and is an incident only recorded by Luke. What I find interesting is that Jesus is portrayed as being able to read, and that it was accepted that he should be given the scroll to read from. Maybe Jesus was on the Nazareth Synagogue reading rota! The practice of the public reading of Scripture was as much part of the worship Jesus attended, as it is ours. I think it isn't unreasonable to suggest that Jesus learned to read in the Synagogue as a child. He read from Isaiah 61. I wonder if the text was in Greek, (the Septuagint) or in Hebrew, or the local language Jesus would have spoken, Aramaic.

The Law and the Prophets

Jesus read from the scroll that was part of the collection known as The Prophets. The other important collection for the Jews is The Law. There were also other scrolls known as The Writings, collectively these were the Jewish Scriptures, and broadly correspond to our Old Testament. They remain important to us because they comprised the Bible that Jesus knew, and that the New Testament writers frequently referred to. The saving work of Jesus is partly interpreted in the light of the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Old Testament documents, produced over a period of about 5 centuries, record the history, poetry, prophecy and wisdom of the people of Israel in relation to God. These documents have also come under the scrutiny of the biblical scholars, a debate I find fascinating.

The historical periods covered in the Old Testament start with the settlement of the nomadic tribes, the United Kingdom of David and Solomon, the divided kingdoms of Israel in the north and Judah in the south, the fall of Israel to Assyria and Judah to Babylon, and the return from Babylon with the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, a long period of history during which time the people developed their accounts of their salvation history. The period of the exile and return from exile was when most of the Old Testament documents were finally redacted, often using material from older sources.

Unusually, Michael Goulder researched Old Testament documents as well as the New Testament. His theory about the Psalms is that some of them originated in the north, so not in the Jerusalem temple.

Our Old Testament reading this morning is from Isaiah. Biblical scholarship has shown that the Book of Isaiah contains at least three separate documents, partly written before the exile, partly during the exile, and partly clearly after the return. Our reading comes from Second Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55). In it we see the theme of the one God of all the Earth, in contrast to the numerous gods of Babylon. There is much about Creation in II Isaiah, which was written around about the same time as the magnificent poem in the first chapter of Genesis. Eventually, all of Creation will recognise God – every knee shall bow and every tongue shall swear. This is quoted in the early hymn about Jesus, found in Philippians, where Jesus, through humility and death has become the universal Christ of God. This, I think is one of the great themes we see growing and developing throughout the Biblical literature – God as God of all people, not just the tribes of Israel. Other great themes are from Hosea: ‘For I desire mercy, not sacrifice’ this is picked up in Matthew 9:13; and Jeremiah: ‘I will put my Law within them and write it on their hearts’, an image referred to in the New Testament letter to the Hebrews. Always these insights are gained in the here and now of everyday life, our laboratory for growing into the Kingdom of God.

Before I finish, let’s think again about Michael Goulder. When he and Clare left All Saints in 1981, it was because he had admitted to himself that he had lost his faith and so would have to resign from the priesthood. This reached the national press, where I first read of it. This can’t have been an easy time for All Saints, and it wasn’t easy for him either. In *Five Stones and a Sling*, he describes how desolate he felt, and he says ‘I still loved the Church; Jesus and the Saints were still the patterns for my life’. He remained part of the community of debate on biblical scholarship for the rest of his working life, submitting bold theories, based on close sifting of the texts, for discussion; and bringing the New Testament off the page in his lectures, some of his last Saturday schools were delivered jointly with Paula Gooder. He says that his guiding principles for the remainder of his life would be ‘to follow the truth wherever it seemed to lead, and to try to live in charity with everyone.’ He might have lost his faith in God, but in leading that sort of life, surely the All Saints community will want to say that God didn’t lose faith in him.

ⁱⁱ Gooder, Paula *Phoebe* Hodder and Staughton 2018

ⁱⁱ Goulder, M. *Five Stones and a Sling* Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009

ⁱⁱⁱ Williams, Rowan *Meeting God in Mark* SPCK, 2014
