

## Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> October Bible Sunday

**Isaiah 55:1-11**

**2 Timothy 3:14-4:5**

**John 5:36b-end**

I wonder what comes to your mind when you think about the Bible.

Those great stories from the Old Testament – Noah, Moses, Ruth, David & Goliath or even the somewhat grisly story of Jael who hammered a tent peg through the head of the Philistine general Sisera.

Or maybe you think of the stories of Jesus in the New Testament – his birth, his miracles, the parables or the story of his arrest, death and resurrection.

Or perhaps you think of the Ten Commandments, and your view of the Bible is of a set of rules that instruct us, guide us and perhaps restrict us.

Or maybe you get confused with all the stories of kings and armies and battles, of the prophets and their words of wisdom, with the letters of Paul to the early churches or with the graphic and barely intelligible language of Revelation. And as such you don't spend much time with the Bible at all.

The Bible is a real mixture. History, legend, poetry, wisdom, story, teaching, letters and visions. Its not the kind of book you can sit down and read cover to cover – after all its not one book, but a collection of different books of different genres – that's what the word bible leans – a library.

But it is a book that deserves study and time. In his letter to Timothy that we read earlier, Paul describes scripture as being “inspired by God and (is) useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults, and giving instruction for right living”.

Which I suppose begs the question of how we do that. How we read and study this book; how we use it for teaching and correction.

I know of people who expect to get a word from God every time they open their Bible – but I am sure that is not the way God intends us to use it. There's the famous story of the person who wanted God's guidance and so opened their Bible at random to find the verse “and Judas hanged himself”. Slightly perturbed they tried again to clarify this message – this time they landed on the phrase “go and do likewise”. Getting guidance from scripture is much more complex than that!

For me there are a few things its good to bear in mind.

First is that although we often describe the Bible as the word of God, we have to realise that it is not the only way God speaks to us. He speaks through creation, through the words of fellow Christians (and those who wouldn't describe themselves as Christians), he speaks through art and music and literature and everyday events; he speaks through our worship and prayers and hopefully he even speaks through sermons. Someone wisely said to me that the statement "The Bible contains the word of God" (which is what I was brought up in in my early days as a Christian) almost rules out God speaking in any other way. Much better to use the phrase "The Word of God contains the Bible" – and certainly much truer to my understanding – and I hope yours - of the way God speaks.

We see an illustration of this in our gospel reading. Jesus observes that the religious leaders search the scriptures for truth about eternal life – for a word from God if you like – but fail to see that God is speaking through him, through Jesus – they are so fixated on looking for revelation from God in scripture that they miss it standing right in front of them!

In my experience it usually happens that a word I have received from scripture is backed up by God speaking in other ways – often through other people, but sometimes just through circumstance. And maybe too God expects us to use our own (God given) common sense!

The second thing is that we would do well to understand the big story of the Bible. To know not only what individual verses and chapters say about God, but what the Bible as a whole says.

For me the Bible tells the story of God's developing relationship with human beings through history. It's a story in which our understanding develops as God becomes more well known through the ages. It's a story that shows a steady growth in wisdom and understanding as God reveals himself in different and changing ways. I think this explains why many people find it hard to reconcile the pictures of God from Old and New Testaments. I see this as a growing understanding of the person and purposes of God.

And a third thing to bear in mind when we read the Bible is that it was written at a certain point in history and in a certain culture which is very different from ours. As we read it we do well to understand its context. In addition, the words were originally written in Hebrew or Greek – what we have is a translation. And I am sure we all understand that translating from one language to another is not exact – it always involves some interpretation. And the meanings of words themselves often change over time. Which is why there are so many translations of the Bible!

Any story we select from the Bible has a context, and to get to the underlying truth we need to understand what that context is. We cannot assume that the way people saw things 2000 or 3000 years ago is the same way we see things.

This makes it far from straightforward – but not impossible by any means – to establish our theology or practice from scripture. We need to look at the whole of the Bible and the context of the various passages. A topical example of this might be in the understanding of

same sex relationships. There are some verses (from both Old and New Testaments) that seem on the surface to be ruling out such relationships. But a deeper study of the contexts and an appreciation of the love and welcome of God demonstrated throughout the whole of the Bible (the big picture if you like) helps me reach the conclusion that such relationships are welcomed and valued and blessed by God.

So a couple of thoughts on reading the Bible before we finish.

First, don't start at the beginning and expect to read right through to the end. Almost certainly you'll give up mid way through the book of Leviticus!

Do choose what you read carefully, and be aware of the type of book it is. Make sure you read it as story if it is; as poetry if that's what it is; as a letter or whatever.

And lastly get some notes or use a commentary – these will give you some information about the culture and the context in which the book was written. A good introduction might be something like the Lion Handbook to the Bible.

Read the Bible prayerfully. Ask God to speak to you through it. And weigh up what you read against what you know of God through the big story of the Bible, through the church, through life and through your experience.

And lastly, don't be afraid to ask. Ask me, the other clergy, the Readers, anyone in fact. We are all on a learning journey together!

Happy reading!