

Sermon 27/10/24 Bible Sunday

‘God has given us a book full of stories

That was meant for his people of old.

It begins with the tale of a garden

And it ends with a city of gold’.

Even if unlike me you did not sing that in Sunday school, I am sure that many of you will recognise the 1950’s sentiments. I cannot quite agree however with the description of the Bible as ‘meant for his people of old’. Surely it is meant for people of all times.

Bibles of course come in all shapes and sizes. I have with me today, my original – in which I have helpfully listed all the addresses I have ever lived at. It is remarkably untatty when you consider that it was used throughout my time in year 5 for Mr Nash’s daily ‘Bible drill’ in which we raced to be first to find that day’s reference. And my most recent acquisition, the Open the book storytelling Bible, that we used for our dramatized reading earlier.

Although I am enthusiastic about the Bible as a book of stories I prefer the description given both by one of the early years children from Kingswood, and reiterated in a Church Times interview with the Christian scholar Diarmaid MacCulloch. The Bible is a library of books, and like most libraries the books cover a range of topics.

As a whole they reflect the story of God’s relationship with his people – not always an easy relationship. It begins rightfully ‘in the beginning’ with the lives of God’s early followers. There are the books chronicling Jewish history with the same excitement contained in The Lord of the Rings or the Narnia books. But then the writers of those were familiar with the stories of the Jewish Kings. There is poetry, the idea that at any time someone somewhere is saying the Psalms continues to fascinate me. There is prophesy.

In the New Testament we find not only the gospels, describing the life of Christ, but letters offering guidance and encouragement to the young Christian churches principally around the area we now know as Turkey. And it concludes with Revelation – a vision that I suspect modern librarians would classify as Sci-Fi.

So much more than a book or stories.

But I really want to consider the idea of the Bible being ‘meant for God’s people of old’. If that was true would we be engaged as we are through the readings during worship? Would any of us bother to pick up a Bible during the week, let alone read in any structured or regular way? Unlikely! What is it that draws us in?

The story of God's relationship with us has a number of themes, our ultimate dependency on him, our ability to do what he does not want us to do, and how the story embraces not only the principals but whole communities of people.

There are so many individuals who contribute to the history of what has gone before – all those unpronounceable Old Testament names – that we sometimes fail to notice how often scripture talks about the crowd. The crowd of unnamed but equally important people. 'The whole people of God' who mithered about Moses, or who gathered to hear the prophets. The crowds who followed Jesus around the lake at Galilee, or who lined the streets on Palm Sunday. When you remember that these were Jewish people with restriction on Sabbath travel, that these were poor people who needed to take every opportunity to earn, being part of these crowds represented great sacrifice.

Importantly these 'other' people are as much a part of the story as the named characters. We will probably never feel that we are named characters in the Christian story, and we never need to be. Although scripture is peppered with tales of great heroic actions, it is also full of people who quietly went about doing what they needed to do. And, yes, we will all have Jonah moments when despite knowing what God wants of us we will do the opposite. Like Jonah we may experience God taking a hand and steering us in the right direction, or we may need to work that out for ourselves.

It is all in there. All our selves, our good days and our bad, are represented on the pages. There is nothing new, nothing that God has not seen before, and will see again, as we try, and frequently fail to follow the example of the gospels and spread the love of God through our thoughts and actions.

God has given us a book full of stories, and poetry, and good advice

That was meant for his people of old, and for his people now,

It begins with the days of creation

And it ends with a tale that is wow!

Earlier in the service we will have a dramatised reading. After it Sarah will give this background information.

Usually during worship we will hear the Bible read aloud, from one or other of the translations. Scholarly people feel we should use words as close to the original language as possible to gain as clear an understanding as possible of what was

originally meant. This does not always work. Greek for example often has one word that translates into several different English words, and vice versa. Who can be sure which meaning was intended. Often, we chose a translation that will be meaningful to our congregation or situation.

The Bible Society has an initiative 'Open the book', which is about telling Bible stories in schools. We forget sometimes how much our culture and language are based around biblical extracts and so telling these stories is not simply about telling the Christian story.

The drama you have just witnessed is based on the 'Open the book' storytelling Bible and as you have seen we are able not just to tell the story but to include the children in the story. The material the Bible Society produces also includes an introduction and a conclusion to help the children think about the meaning of what they have seen and heard, and we end with a short prayer.

In this parish we are privileged to have three separate schools involved with this, Widney, Kingswood and St James. We see different year groups and in different settings school hall, classroom and church. Rehearsal is not always possible. High powered directors would be tearing their hair out – we have learned to go with the flow.

The children really enjoy the sessions, there are always multiple volunteers to join in, in fact this week one child asked if it would be possible to have two stories next time. We really enjoy the sessions whether we are narrating, taking the lead role or helping the children with their parts. We are keeping the Bible story- God's story – alive.