

Sermon 7 October 2018 – St Mary's, Black Torrington

This evening, as we continue to explore what it means to be a disciple, we are going to be looking at the Word of God. So, what do we mean by the Word of God? How does God make his word known to us? How can we understand or interpret the Word of God? And how should we respond?

We often hear the expression, 'the Word of God'. For example, often, after a Bible reading, the reader will say, '*Hear the Word of the Lord*'. In the letter to the Hebrews, the Word of God is described as being alive and active, like a two-edged sword. The psalmist says *your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path*. Jeremiah likens the word of God to fire, or to a hammer. And James describes it as a mirror.

Martin Luther, on the other hand, said that,

'God writes the Gospel not in the Bible alone, but also on trees and in the flowers, in the clouds and in the stars.

But what does the Word of God mean to you?

One thing is clear – the Word of God is much more than just the words written in the Bible – it is the truths, the meanings, the intentions that lie behind those words. And it is the ongoing revelation of God to his people through his creation, or through the spoken word, or through the lives of people.

As we heard in our earlier reading from the book of Isaiah, the Word of God is like the rain and snow that falls from heaven, that causes the crops to grow and provides food for the hungry. And God says,

'It is the same with my word.

I send it out, and it always produces fruit.

It will accomplish all I want it to,

and it will prosper everywhere I send it'.

The ultimate expression of God's Word is the life and example of Jesus himself, the Son of God revealed in human form. As we read in the beginning of John's gospel,

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth'.

In short, the Word of God is God's total revelation of himself to humankind, through the written word, through the spoken word, and through the living word, revealed to us in the person of Jesus.

But while the Word of God is much more than just the words printed in the Bible, the scriptures themselves are a good place to begin. Even Jesus accepted the primacy of scripture – remember when he was being tempted in the wilderness? To each of the temptations thrown at him by Satan, Jesus' response was based in scripture. So, when the devil asked him to turn the stones into bread, Jesus responded, *“The scriptures say, people do not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God”*.

And in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made it clear – he had come not to over-turn scripture, but to fulfil it. If the written word of God was good enough for Jesus to base his ministry on, then it should be good enough for us, as his disciples. As we heard in our reading from Paul's letter to Timothy,

‘All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true, and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives’.

Or as the New International Version of the same verse puts it, *‘All scripture is God-breathed’*. I think that gives a lovely picture of how the Holy Spirit inspired the writers of the Bible texts.

Further on in the same reading, Paul says *‘a time is coming when people will no longer listen to sound and wholesome teaching. They will follow their own desires and will look for teachers who will tell them whatever their itching ears want to hear. They will reject the truth and chase after myths’*.

Does that sound familiar? I think that is a pretty good description of how things are in our world today. Modern life, especially in the West, carries with it great uncertainty, too much focus on the self and on our material possessions, little or no trust in our politicians and leaders, and a genuine doubt about what truth even looks like.

But is everything in the Bible true? The thing to remember is that the Bible is not a single book, written in a consistent style. It is a whole library of books, coming from many different genres, written by a wide variety of people over a great swathe of history and in very different circumstances. Some of it is a historical record; but some is prophecy, some is poetry, some is allegory, some letters giving support and instruction – and so on. And it was written in times and cultures when different literary conventions were followed – so, for example, not everything is written in a strict chronological sequence.

There may well be times when we cannot say that the biblical text represents precise and literal truth. But what we can say is that, as the Word of God, all of scripture conveys profound truths which lie behind the written words; it is all there for a purpose. The trick is how we interpret and understand the written word.

The interpretation of scripture was, of course, the reason for most of the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees. They both followed the same scriptures; but Jesus was constantly rebuking the Pharisees for their wrong interpretation, which so often resulted in strict, inflexible laws, devoid of the compassion that God had intended. Remember when Jesus was condemned by the teachers of the law for healing on the Sabbath, or mixing with people that the Pharisees considered to be unsuitable. And in today's gospel reading, Jesus is berating the Pharisees for refusing to accept who he was:

“You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me! Yet you refuse to come to me to receive this life”.

So how can we make sure that we are interpreting God's Word correctly? What steps should we take to try to understand not just the words written on the page, but the meaning that lies behind them? Here are some suggestions:

- Pray for guidance from the Holy Spirit – as the original words were inspired by the Holy Spirit, then he will be the best guide to the true meaning.
- It is often helpful to read the Bible with others, so that we can compare opinions on difficult passages.
- Read the same passage in more than one translation. Some are very true to the original texts (NRSV, NIV), but others will put a different slant on some of the familiar words (e.g. the Message). See which you feel more comfortable with.
- Read in context. Try to avoid the temptation to dive into the Bible in a random way, and draw too much meaning from a single verse. Over the years, so much harm has been done by Christians who focus on the words of a single verse, and derive meanings that the writer never intended. Even if we are drawn to a particular verse, we should read around it – maybe read the whole chapter, so you get a clearer picture of what is going on.

- Try to work out what sort of book it is – historical, allegorical, poetry, praise, lament, etc. – this will influence the way we try to interpret the words.
- Try to understand what the writer was trying to say to his original audience – how is that affected by the social norms of their time, or by culture, etc. Only then can we start to think about what the words are saying to us now, in our own time and culture. The two may not always be the same.
- Using a good commentary, or a study Bible, can be really helpful.

Christianity is essentially a revealed religion; it is not about people searching in the dark for God – it is about God revealing himself to us, in a way so personal that it demands a response. And God didn't stop revealing himself to us when the last book of the Bible was written, two thousand years ago – the Word of God is not static. God continues to reveal new aspects of his love and purpose for us every time we gain a new insight into his word – perhaps as a result of reading, or listening to a sermon or discussion, or through some aspect of his creation, or through the life and example of the Word made flesh – Jesus himself.

I'll finish with some words from the American priest and writer, Barbara Brown Taylor, in which she talks about her response to reading the Word of God:

"I know that the Bible is a special kind of book, but I find it as seductive as any other. If I am not careful, I can begin to mistake the words on the page for the realities they describe. I can begin to love the dried ink marks on the page more than I love the encounters that gave rise to them. If I am not careful, I can decide that I am really much happier reading my Bible than I am entering into what God is doing in my own time and place, since shutting the book to go outside will involve the very great risk of taking part in stories that are still taking shape.

Neither I nor anyone else knows how these stories will turn out, since at this point they involve more blood than ink. The whole purpose of the Bible, it seems to me, is to convince people to put the written word down in order to become living words in the world for God's sake. For me, this willing conversion of ink back to blood is the full substance of faith."