Last Sunday after Trinity (Year A)

Bible Sunday

'From Head to Heart'

Today the church celebrates Bible Sunday. I wonder if you can recall your earliest experience of the bible? Perhaps it had been handed down from generation to generation and sat on a bookshelf and rarely opened. Or perhaps it was a bible presented to you at school or Sunday school?

The first bible I remember handling was a small blue hard backed book given to me by my godmother when I was about seven years old. Whilst I could barely make sense of the King James text, I found the many colour photographs of the Holy Land interspersed throughout both fascinating and enticing.

For many people, their experience of the bible stops at an early age; perhaps when they leave Sunday school or fulltime education. The bible may continue to sit on the bookshelf alongside academic textbooks and dog-eared novels gathering dust but its contents remains a mystery waiting to be revealed.

There are a multitude of reasons why people choose to dismiss the bible. Perhaps they see it as irrelevant or an unintelligible book full of myths, legends and archaic rules: "Thou shalt not do x or y…" Maybe quite simply they just don't believe God. Yet despite this, with over 5 billion copies sold and distributed, the bible remains the best selling book in the world. That's a lot of books, so there must be something in it!

The bible is a sacred text that incorporates many different genres of literature including history and poetry. They are

the result of a creative dialogue between ancient traditions and different communities down the ages[1]. The many stories reflect how various individuals and communities have come to comprehend God and how this understanding influenced their behaviour and how they relate to one another.

Today's collect for Bible Sunday opens with the words 'Blessed Lord, who caused all Holy Scripture to be written for our learning'. Essentially it is God who is the source of all wisdom. It was St Paul writing to a Christian named Timothy who as a boy had grown up with the sacred writings said:

> All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, **17** so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3: 16-17).

Like Timothy, I started to engage with the bible when I was a youngster. As a teenager I joined my local Crusader Bible Class It was here that the bible started to move from just another book on the shelf to the Word of God. Through the faithful teaching of my Crusader leaders I began to study and engage with scripture. I asked lots of questions (probably too many!!) and discovered for myself the truths that lay hidden within its covers. Soon after I joined a local church and attended both Sunday services and the midweek bible study; I soon couldn't get enough of the bible!

Our collect prayer for Bible Sunday encourages us to ask God to help us hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest holy scripture. In order to understand the bible we first need to hear or read it. At most Anglican churches you will generally each week hear readings from the Old and New Testaments.

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[1] Professor John K. Riches, Professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism at the University of Glasgow

But I wonder how much time we actually spend reading and engaging with the bible outside of church? One of the most rewarding experiences for me has been leading our parish bi-monthly all-age confirmation and discipleship group (which is currently suspended due to COVID-19). Each week we read and listen to scripture, we discussed what the passage means and then how we might apply to our lives. It has been so encouraging to see so many people deepen their faith through regular engagement with scripture. One former group member Amanda Champs has just begun theological training to become a Licenced Lay Reader.

Today's collect prayer also talks of marking scripture. This reminds me of my early days as a Christian. Most of the congregation at the church that I attended brought their bible to church and would follow the passages during the service. It was commonplace to underline or mark particular passages in their bible that resonated with them. As a consequence my own bible became very well used.

Having heard, read and marked, we are finally encouraged to inwardly digest scripture. That is allow it to move from our heads to deep into our hearts so that it influences our thoughts and behaviour.

In our gospel reading for today Jesus was facing a challenge from the Pharisees who had heard how he had silenced the Sadducees (22:34). One of their group, a religious lawyer questioned him as to which was the greatest of all the commandments. Jesus replied that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and the second to love your neighbour as yourself. (22:37-39).

Note the emphasis on the heart and not head – firstly loving God wholeheartedly and secondly loving our neighbour as ourselves. One flows directly from the other. Jesus knew all

too well that the Pharisees and Sadducees had plenty of head knowledge. They understood the Hebrew Scriptures in minute detail. They would have known the many laws that demonstrated love towards their neighbours listed in today's Old Testament lesson from the book of Leviticus. However, had this knowledge shifted from their head to their heart? Was this reflected in a change of behaviour towards their neighbour? Sadly probably not!

It was Evangelical Theologian and bible expositor the late John Stott who said these wise words:

> "We must allow the Word of God to confront us, to disturb our security, to undermine our complacency and to overthrow our patterns of thought and behaviour."

This Bible Sunday can I encourage you not to ignore the bible sitting at home on your bookshelf? Why not open it and use the words of today's collect prayer to ask God to help you hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest it. Amen.

Rev Andrew Jacobson
25th October 2020