

29 October 2017

Last Sunday after Trinity



Once again we welcomed Reverend Neil Richardson to lead and speak at our morning service:

Today is the final Sunday in the Trinity season. 19 Sundays ago, back on the 18th of June, we started the slow progress through the summer weeks, past various saintly festivals and Harvest and then into the season of Autumn and gradually, we are edging our way towards the winter festivals of light which start on Wednesday with All Saintstide and the season of Remembrance, joining together All Saints, All Souls, Remembrance Sunday and from thence, into the Advent Season. It is a great time of year in the Christian Church.

The Collect for this Sunday reminds us of the importance of the Bible in our formation as Christian disciples and our heritage of faith, In some churches, this Sunday is actually observed as Bible Sunday to emphasise the role of the scriptures in our church's story.

The Collect is a prayer that we might take the scriptures seriously: "to hear them, to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them" so that in our Christian life, we find in them comfort which will lead us to embrace and for ever hold fast the hope of eternal life.

For many of the years of our Christian era, the ability to read the scriptures was reserved to a minority, due to the lack of literacy skills and to the general view that such matters were the proper province of the church's officials, the clergy. Lay people, keep to your inferior station!

Indeed the word clergy comes from a root which means simply, someone who can read. There is evidence of an attempt to render the Bible into English as early as 1390, and stories from the Bible may have been told by preachers and teachers, and of course, church windows told bible stories in stained glass, but the text itself only became generally available to common people later in the 15th and 16th century, when

- the Reformation led to translations from Hebrew, Greek and Latin into the common languages of Europe;
- and the printing press made wide publication possible.

These days, the Bible is present in almost every home and school in the country. It is a best seller, but it has been dubbed the "least read best seller" of all time. Modern Christians divide into two neat groups: those who regard the Bible as the inerrant revelation of the Word of God, and those for whom this is a rather strange document read out in churches on a Sunday morning, and not a lot more! The scant regard with which many modern Christians view the Bible is in sharp contrast to the extreme

suffering and cruelty which surrounded the attempts to give the common people a copy in their own language. William Tyndale, for example, was one of the originators of the project to create an English Bible, but he failed to get the support of the Bishop of London and was forced to go abroad to do his work of translation and in 1536 was strangled and burned at the stake near Brussels for his troubles. What a strange thought, as we look at the dusty volume sitting on our shelves, unread, unnoticed, even!

The fears of the Church authorities were that if the mysteries of the scriptures got into the hands of the common people, it would unleash a stream of misunderstanding and heresy. This was paternalism at its best, for in those days, the Pope considered it his duty to protect his Church from erroneous doctrines which might condemn the faithful to rot in hell.

Thankfully, the days of a clericalised ring-fence around the scriptures is a thing of the past, although it has to be said that the Bible remains a happy hunting ground for the unbalanced and the unscrupulous of various kinds. It is possible to prove virtually anything by quoting texts out of context and applying them to situations unimagined by the original authors. (And he went and hanged himself...)

However, it is a good thing to be able to read the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus, to read his parables and his conversations with various people, so long as you remember that it was all written a long time ago, and the assumptions of the past are not the assumptions of the present. Interpreting the scriptures is one of the key issues for modern Christians and one where there is much controversy, as the ideas of 2000 years ago collide with our contemporary insights and wisdom. With sensitivity and understanding, the scriptures do bring light to bear on our current pre-occupations and difficult issues. The process is not simplistic, but it can be done and it can be done well and positively for the community.

To take the Bible seriously is one of the great liberties we inherit from the past. It is also too important to leave to the enthusiasts. We must all take it more seriously, and then we could take more advantage of it in our own life and time.

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The H. Scriptures (1633)

Oh Book! infinite sweetness! let my heart
Suck ev'ry letter, and a honey gain,
Precious for any grief in any part;
To clear the breast, to mollify all pain.
Thou art all health, health thriving, till it make
A full eternity: thou art a mass
Of strange delights, where we may wish and take.
Ladies, look here; this is the thankful glass,
That mends the looker's eyes: this is the well
That washes what it shows. Who can [endear](#)
Thy praise too much? thou art heav'n's [Lidger](#) here,
Working against the states of death and hell.
Thou art joy's [handse!](#): heav'n lies flat in thee,
Subject to ev'ry mounter's bended knee.

George Herbert (1593-1633)

2. The H. Scriptures (1999)

No book. A store, a granary of gain!
What treasure here, what riches may be found
To stir the mind and heart. Yet for the insane,
Th' intemperate - a happy hunting ground.
Here sparkle lover's voice and poet's line,
And rulers, godly and ungodly, sway;
The soldier's sword, the lawyer, concubine,
All meet together in a fresh array.
Then, breath of inspiration makes it sure
And in the language of the ancient world
We see the Word of God at last unfurled,
And with His energetic signature.
Who better to be guardians of good news
Than ancient Greeks and very ancient Jews?

Neil Richardson