

Sermon 25.10.2015

– Bible Sunday –

*In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit...*

## **Intro**

I always think that preaching on the Bible is a little bit like building a sand castle in front of the Tower of London. The best you can ever hope to do is to catch the eyes of those who are looking down instead of up, and in doing so, point them towards the real deal.

When we ask ourselves ‘What actually is the Bible?’, very often the first association that comes to mind is the ‘mantra’ that we often hear repeated in Church: “The Bible is: The Word of God.” Though I agree with the statement and don’t think it is wrong (!), I often wonder whether somebody not familiar with the Bible would find this to be a satisfying answer, an answer that would make sense to them. It also makes me wonder whether the person giving this answer actually understands the significance of the statements he or she is making. Do we understand what it means for the Bible to be the “Word of God?”. Do we? Are the words written down in the Bible really the words spoken by God? Is the Bible not written by human beings like you and me? Weren’t the words written down a long time ago? So this raises yet further questions – can we trust the Bible today? and is the Bible still relevant for us in the twenty-first century”

## **Part I: The ‘strange new world’ of the Bible**

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth, probably the most influential theologian of the twentieth century, spoke about the ‘strange new world’ of the Bible. Barth was trained in the predominantly liberal theology of the nineteenth century (in places like Berlin under famous theologians such as the church historian Adolf von Harnack) and his first church post was not in a flourishing place like Regent’s Park but in the small mining village of Safenwill.

When Barth arrived and preached this liberal theology there, he wondered why nobody in his congregation responded. Barth discovered that the liberal Christianity he had learned at university simply didn't speak to anybody in his parish. His hearers didn't turn up on a Sunday morning for historical-critical insights. The turning point for Barth came at the advent of World War 1, when all of his former university teachers signed a petition supporting the Kaiser's war effort – the 1914 "Manifesto of the Ninety-Three German Intellectuals to the Civilized World". To Barth this was the epitome of the entire liberal theology in which he had been trained.

On a personal level, Barth became increasingly disillusioned with his previous mentors, and on a spiritual level, distanced himself from the liberal theology he had been taught. This disappointment and frustration drove him to re-examine his own theology and read the Bible afresh alongside his good friend Eduard Thurneysen. The two preachers went on a journey together.

It was particularly the person of Jesus of Nazareth in the Gospels and Paul's letter to the Romans that gripped his attention. Here in these pages he encountered what he called a 'strange new world', discovered God, and realised that he had previously only studied a historical Christianity that was so entrenched in culture that it hardly resembled the Gospel message he found in the New Testament. What happened was that Barth read the Bible for the first time through a new lens – with the understanding that the Bible's central subject matter and content was *God*. Barth understood that God alone reveals God and God has done so in Jesus.

Everything we do and say as Christians therefore coheres around Jesus. His understanding of divine revelation was radically changed with the realisation that the risen Christ still meets and speaks to people today in and through the Bible. This resulted in a transformation of his interpretation and exposition of all the Scriptures. The outcome for Barth was his Romans commentary, which immediately brought him to fame and hit the theological world like a 'bombshell'.

## Part II: The Bible and the God we encounter

For Barth, the Bible is like Jesus Christ – that is, a mystery, fully God’s word and fully human word. It was written by human beings, but fully divinely inspired. It is not that the people who wrote the Bible were super spiritual, which makes the Bible divine, but because God has chosen to bind himself to the letter of the word by his Spirit, and has promised to reveal himself as the Emmanuel to us – as the God who is with us. This is the central message of Scripture: God reveals himself in all the stories, as the God who wants to be with his people. And only if we encounter this God in the Bible, does the Bible actually ‘become’ the Word of God – it is an event, a revelation-event that needs to take place in each individual person. What brings about a change in each other us is a spiritual encounter with the risen Christ through reading the text.

By reading a Bible passage afresh one often encounters a strangeness even with the most familiar Bible passages. We also need to go through this event several times as we mature in our Christian walk. In fact, I would actually argue that it is unhealthy to become overfamiliar with the Bible. Don’t get me wrong, we should know our Bible, but we deal here with the living word of God through which we not only learn *facts* about God, but where we also encounter God personally.

Because you see, we need to remember that the Bible is God’s story with the world. History in the Bible is ‘His story’. So the Bible is not so much about humanity – it is not so much about us (!) – but about God’s revelation and in particular about his self-revelation in Jesus Christ. It is about His story of salvation, about his goodness and grace, and only in a second step is it about us – and even then, only who we are in light of God! God reveals himself in specific historic circumstances and reacts to these specific circumstances. He reveals himself first and foremost as deliverer and redeemer, as the God who through his covenants remains faithful to Israel and the Church.

### Part III: Covenant and Obedience

So the Bible is not a scientific manual talking about *hows* and *whats*. Instead it's a collection of books of different literary genres, all pointing towards the *who* – God! For Barth and Bonhoeffer too, the central question of the Bible is thus always the 'who' question – 'Who is God' or rather 'Who is Jesus Christ'.

The Bible is one organic, united book, consisting of promise (in the Old Testament) and fulfilment (in the New Testament). This relationship of promise and fulfilment is a good picture of the salvation narrative and can be summarised with the biblical word covenant, which is really the unifying and overarching concept of the Bible. These stories about the covenant are all about two Hebrew words: *Zedeka* und *Chesed* – God's faithfulness and grace. From start to finish, it is about God wanting to be with us in a covenant fellowship – hence St. Augustine's encouragement to everyone to read the Bible like a series of love letters from God, written directly to them. At its very heart, the covenant is about the salvation and reconciliation story of God and humanity, which comes to its fulfilment in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – the fulfilment of the covenant, who is fully God and fully human, uniting God with humanity – with us. This is something we celebrate during the Eucharist. Jesus is this Melchizedek, this *Melchi-Zedek*, meaning 'King of faithfulness'. He is the main protagonist who stands at the centre and is the goal of the entire biblical narrative, and the covenant in his body on the cross is the sign and proof of God's love for us and desire to have fellowship with us.

However, though the covenant shows God's faithfulness to us, it also demands our faithfulness and obedience towards him and we might say that this whole salvation narrative of the covenant that we read about in the Bible hangs between two trees: the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden, and and the tree of Golgotha, the cross. It is a story of disobedience versus obedience. So we also need to be obedient to God's call and pick up our cross daily and follow in Christ's footsteps.

Take Queen Elizabeth as an example. In some sense, she has to be obedient to the call upon her life to be governor and Queen, denying herself every morning. We too need to daily deny our own old adamic way, to submit to God's call upon our life and to be obedient to his will by following the life of Jesus, the life of the cross!

## **Conclusion**

So we have seen that the Bible is not merely a history book, nor is it a psychology text, nor a scientific manual. The Bible is the inspired Word of God revealed to humanity. 2 Tim 3:16-17 teaches us, *“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the people of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”*

Most importantly, the Bible includes essential information on how we can know God personally. Paul says that this message is what is of “first importance” (1 Cor 15:3). The Gospel is that God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross for our sins and that He defeated death through His resurrection. God now offers eternal life to all who believe in Christ (John 3:16).

Scripture will never be irrelevant because it addresses the universal needs of all people — to know God, to experience forgiveness, and to know how God would have us live. Times may change, contexts and societies may change, but God's Word does not. In it we find principles that still impact our lives today, and words that are powerful and have transformative power.

## **Introduction to the Bible in a Year Programme**

I want to end with an invitation:

Though we might not be physically blind like Bartimaeus was, at times we are often spiritually blind when it comes to the will of God.

As the Psalmist says, the Bible is a lamp unto our feet and brings us the light of life, Jesus Christ, so that we can see God's will. That's why William decided to introduce the Bible in a year programme here at St. Mark's.

I was given this Bible for my ordination, and I want to invite you all to join me in reading the Bible in a year, a programme started by Fr. Marek Zabriskie, the founder of the Bible Challenge and the Center for Biblical Studies, who writes:

*The Bible is best understood in the context of a faith community and by persons who are committed to following the teachings of Jesus and obeying the Word of God in their daily life. Merely hearing the Scriptures read aloud on Sunday, however, is not enough to know and experience the living, life-transforming Word of God.*

So if you are interested and want to know more about this programme do please contact either William or me – we are very happy to tell you more about it.

I would like to end with a prayer written by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer:

*Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Saviour Jesu Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen!*