

Making sense of the Bible

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Luke 4:14-21

The least-read best-seller: that's what they used to call the Bible. I don't know if it still holds true in 2016 but it used to be the case that most homes used to have one. In a card board box, still wrapped in its presentational cellophane, in a drawer, or on a high shelf in a cupboard or wardrobe. Given as a gift at baptism, or at Sunday School, or when you became a member of the Church.

In my ministry it has been important that in the churches where I have served that there be Bibles in the pews. I know many people don't look at them, or follow the reading as it is read, but I'd encourage you to do that if you would like. I know recently of at least one member of the congregation, going through a difficult time, who found more comfort and encouragement than they thought likely from hearing the Bible passage, and then reading it again through the tough times in the following week. The words jumped from the page. Chance? Providence? Or God, once more, finding yet another way to touch a life, a mind, a heart, and reassure when reassurance was needed.

Tomorrow Scots and assorted others celebrate the birth of Robert Burns, seen by many as the national poet of Scotland. Throughout his life, with all its problems, Burns knew, as he wrote in his Epistle to a Young Friend, that "A correspondence fix'd wi' Heaven is sure a noble anchor." And part of that anchor was a fairly robust knowledge of the Bible, what it said, and what it didn't say, and the wrestling with meaning. The Bible helps gives us a vocabulary and a grammar so that we might correspond with Heaven.

A correspondence with Heaven, or, as Burns puts it in what is one of his greatest achievements *The Cotter's Saturday Night*, "the language of the soul." It was a profound thing for Burns, this "language of the soul". It touched on the deep-down things that he believed and held to be of

infinite importance. Some were spiritual, some were social, some were to do with relationships; some were to do with what was honourable in being a man. His themes in so many of his poems echo this - Truth, Justice, Compassion, Reverence, and Love. And these great themes are drawn straight from the great themes of the Bible.

A word of caution. The Bible is not a magical book that, when opened randomly, specific pearls of wisdom will rattle out. The Bible is about an astonishing range of insights, experiences, world-view points that might, or might not, inform our living today. It is a book that contains poetry, history, philosophy, song, musings about the end times, wisdom, early forms of biography, letters. It is a book written by many hands over a period of time that stretches at least 2,000 years. It is a book set in the context of those 2,000 years, and will provide many different perspectives, many of which will contradict our modern-day experience, some of which will be time-bound, and some of which, because they deal with the human condition, will be time-less.

The Bible is a book that demands people of faith read it, but more than read it, interpret it and attempt to understand it and apply it. The author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee, wrote, "The book to read is not the one that thinks for you, but the one that makes you think. No book in the world equals the Bible for that." As we read the Bible, the Bible reads us. We are meant to engage with it, wonder about it, challenge it, disagree with it, be comforted by it, be transformed by it, and begin the process all over again. Each time we read it.

Some of us found that out at the Manse Lent studies last year reading Mark's gospel, and it may be that those thinking of coming to next month's series when we look at Exploring Faith will find the same. Anyone going to the Bible expecting easy answers to difficult questions will frequently be disappointed. The Bible is a library of books that we are meant to engage with, and look beneath the surface, as best we can, to what the meaning might be. Sometimes we might need help, sometimes all it takes is an experience of life to get something of the sense of what is being written. Beware taking the easy option of the fundamentalists who will talk about the 'plain meaning of the Bible.' There is no such thing as a 'plain meaning of the Bible.' It is a stimulating,

challenging, nuanced book that demands our best attention as we listen out for what God may be saying to us today.

For make no mistake, as maybe you have found, God is still speaking today, through the Bible, and through other means. Attempting steadfastly to catch our attention to make us think, and wonder, and then transform or act. It is one of the powerful joys of faith – that through these old words God finds a way to say new things to people today. If we read; and if we listen; and if we think.

It's what brought the people of Israel together in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah the prophets, after the long years of exile in Babylon and the people returned to Jerusalem. It was in that time of exile that the disparate stories of faith had been gathered and written down, in the 6thBC. The people read from the book, with interpretation, so the people understood what they were reading. And the words moved them and touched them and gave them hope as the city and the Temple, were rebuilt.

Jesus, at the beginning of His ministry, in His hometown of Nazareth, goes to the synagogue, and was handed the scrolls of scripture that contained the prophecy of Isaiah. He read it, He interpreted it, He applied it to Himself, and to the people of His day, as it had never been done before. The people heard God speaking to them that day. And they didn't like it, many of them, when they grasped what it was that Jesus said. He had taken the words of the Bible, interpreted them, made sense of them, and said they applied to the people 'today'.

Jesus had taken the words of Isaiah, about coming to share the good news about releasing the captives, giving sight to those who could not see, freeing the oppressed, and proclaiming that all of this – part of God's unfolding kingdom – was taking place now. He said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

That's what makes the Bible difficult. Not because it's message or it's meaning is impenetrable, or too hard, or fogged in the mists of time, but because very often its meaning is all too clear and all too direct. It requires each one of us, once we've heard and once we've thought, to go and do something about it. Mark Twain once wrote, "It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it's the parts that I do understand."

The Bible is not always easy, but it is not beyond our intellectual grasp; the Bible is not always comfortable, but it is often comforting; the Bible does not spell everything out in detail for us, but it gives us enough information to work with God and makes sense of what God is saying to us today.

What would change in our lives and in our churches if we stood in pulpit and pews on Sunday morning and declared to God and to one another, “God gives no other day than today to bring good news to the poor, to release the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and new beginnings to all who have failed”?ⁱ

That message from Isaiah that Jesus interpreted is not simply a challenge to set up programmes to help those in need. It’s also a challenge to each hear to ask, “where am I impoverished, where am I incarcerated, what are my incapacities, what is oppressing me, where am I guilty.”ⁱⁱ That’s the imaginative power of making sense of the Bible. It points us to look outwards at the world around us. It points us to look inward at our own lives.

Making sense of the Bible is a challenge to all Christians. This intriguing, infuriating, inspiring book is something that informs our faith, contradicts our prejudice, and if we read it and work with it, makes our faith supple, resilient, worthwhile. It doesn’t take a clutch of degrees in theology to interrogate the text and ask of it, and of God, What did this mean when it was written? What does it mean now? How does it affect the way I live my life?

That’s what I love about the Bible, the challenge of wrestling with its complexities and working out what through it God is saying to you, to me, to the Church today. Take up, and read!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Robert M Brearley, Feasting on the Word Year C vol 1, p288

ⁱⁱ Samuel Wells, A Nazareth Manifesto, p152