

Reformation 500 4: Scripture alone

Psalm 119: 41-48 (p618)

Luke 24:13-27 (p1061)

Pray- Gracious God, we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from your mouth. Make us hungry for this heavenly food, that it may nourish us today in the ways of eternal life; through Jesus Christ, the bread of heaven. Amen.

You'll notice that we like to point you towards your pew Bibles at Christ Church. For many Christians in the world today, and for people in this country 500 years ago, a Bible in their own language was a forbidden object. The official translation of the Bible was in Latin, and only the highly educated- Priests and scholars- could have access to it. Everyone else would have to make do with stained-glass windows and the occasional street play.

For a long time, people in Europe were hungry for the Bible in their own language. John Wycliffe and others had produced English versions that were underground successes, produced abroad and smuggled in. In 1496, a Dean of St Paul's Cathedral organised public Bible readings in English- within six months there were 20,000 people packed in the church and at least that many outside trying to get in... incredible, especially given population of London then was around 60'000 people..

In the early years of the Reformation, English Bibles and their readers were ruthlessly hunted- to be found with one would mean both you and the book would burn. Eventually, by God's grace, in spite of the capricious tyrant that was Henry VIII, every church in the country would have a copy of an English Bible chained to its lectern. Mass printing meant that some people could afford to buy one. A commentator at the time said- *'Englishmen have now in hand in every church and place, almost every man the Holy Bible- instead of the old fabulous and fantastical books of the Table round, Lancelot etc..'* Such was the clamour that the King had to issue a proclamation forbidding people to read the Bible aloud for themselves during services.

What drives people to cram themselves into Cathedrals to hear, go to their deaths for owning a book, queue up to read? *A reason that was new and exhilarating to them- and dangerously familiar to us; The Bible is God speaking the Good news of his Gospel to us. My hope and prayer is that we will experience something of that newness at Christchurch today.*

God speaks. This is a starting point. Right from the beginning of the Bible- Genesis one, God speaks the world into being. And he continues to speak. We talk about Spirituality a lot, it's a big word these days. Much of modern spirituality is a turn inwards- towards myself, searching my own soul for answers. There's a place for quietness and self-reflection, but the starting point for Christian spirituality is that God speaks. There's a centre of the universe, and it's not us. The God who made heaven and earth wants us to hear of his greatness and of his bottomless love for us. *If he wants us to hear him, why isn't he clearer?*

There's a story you might have heard before. A man is drowning in the ocean, and he's certain God will rescue him. A boat comes- no, no, God will rescue me. A helicopter, etc... he drowns. The man says to God 'why didn't you rescue me?' – 'I sent a boat, a helicopter- what more do you need?' The Bible is a boat, a helicopter. It's there in front of us. Sitting and reading is an everyday thing- but it's a place where God, in his great mercy, meets us.

The Bible is from God, but it's also a human story, of God working through a particular people, in particular times and places. **I heard a story once of a lady** who was angry that her children were learning French at school. She said 'If English was good enough for Jesus, its good enough for my kids!' The Bible- and everyone in it, including Jesus- are from a different time and place from our own. In the Bible, God speaks through human voices, human handwriting, over hundreds of years and in different languages. 2 timothy 3:16- all scripture is God-breathed. These people spoke and wrote from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit, delivering something that was relevant for them at that moment, but also relevant for all people everywhere.

I know that for some of you, and certainly for many of your friends, neighbours, and families- this will be contentious. How can you base your life on a book that old? I've talked before here about how and why the Bible is historically reliable and consistent- and how so much of recent scholarship points to the Gospels, in particular, as eyewitness accounts. That's a conversation I'd love to have with you.

For today, I want to us to see that the **Bible is enough, the Bible is challenging, and the Bible is personal.**

The Bible is enough- the scriptures are our ultimate and trustworthy authority for Christian life. This doesn't mean that the Bible is the only place where truth is found, but it does mean that everything else in life should be interpreted in light of Scripture. The Bible is not a detailed guide to every facet

of human life, but it tells us what we need to know for the important things in life- what we need to trust and obey Jesus. That one central truth- trusting and obeying Jesus- flows into a thousand different channels.

Let's take an example. You're thinking about getting a new car. If you're looking for makes and models, Auto trader is more useful than the Bible. But going to God's word might be a place to start thinking about your motivations- why do I want to buy a new car? Do I need one? Who am I living to impress? What should my financial priorities be? Where am I getting my security and status from? These are the sorts of questions that life is made of, and these are the questions that the Gospel deals with, and you'll find them dealt with in the Bible.

'Scripture Alone' doesn't mean the Bible is the only way God speaks to us. We can't limit God. We might hear from God through wise words from friends, nudges from the Holy Spirit, coincidences, your conscience, music, nature.... Psalm 19 says *'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.'* I'm excited about the second series of Blue Planet starting tonight. It will show me something of how glorious God is. He will show me something of his creativity and intelligence in his creation. John Calvin says- *There is certainly nothing so obscure or contemptible, even in the smallest corners of the earth, in which some marks of the power and wisdom of God may not be seen. And yet- verse 7- 'the law of the Lord is perfect'*. That's the ultimate authority, the most direct speaking that God does, how we come to hear of God's boundless grace in Jesus Christ. You can experience God's beauty in a blue whale or an equation or a bassline, *but those things won't tell you that Christ died and is risen that you might have eternal life*. Whatever else your heart says to you, however else you hear God, whatever else you discern- the Bible is the backstop. And the Bible is enough. The theologian Karl Barth, one of the greatest minds of the twentieth Century, was once asked to sum up his vast output in one sentence. *'Jesus loves me this I know, because the Bible tells me so'*.

The Bible is challenging- in more than one way. Sometimes the Bible is shockingly graphic. Much of it is too raw for Sunday school; enough sex and violence to get an 18 certificate. In the Bible's teaching, we'll be sure to find things that offend or upset us. If you find something in the Bible that offends your sensibilities, and you're tempted to stop reading, or walk away and not explore further, then let me ask you a question- did you really expect it not to? If this is a book, given by God for all times, all people, all places, do you think that us, reading it as liberal-minded westerners in 2017, would be the one group of people NOT to find something we didn't like? Every culture will find

something offensive in the Bible. We'll just find different bits offensive. That doesn't mean that some parts aren't profoundly challenging to us- or even apparently contradictory to other bits. But it's always worth exploring further. In my experience God speaks more to me through the bits I find hard to swallow than the bits I find easy.

The Bible can sometimes be challenging, not because it's offensive, but because it's hard to understand. Do you ever read bits and think 'I don't get that?' **You're not alone.** Peter wrote this about Paul in 2 Peter; '*He writes the same way in all his letters... his letters contain some things that are hard to understand.*' Peter, the fisherman, little or no qualifications. Paul, highly educated. Peter notices that Paul uses heavy concepts. And yet the Bible is there for all people. Bishop JC Ryle once wrote '*the poorest Englishman who understands his Bible knows more about religion than the wisest philosophers of Greece and Rome.*' Even if it's hard, it doesn't mean it's not for you. We can use Bible notes, talk through with trusted friends. Chances are someone else has thought about the same questions you're looking at. There are resources out there that can help you read the Bible with more confidence.

I'd like to open that opportunity to each of you today. If you're thinking, 'I'd love to read the Bible, but I don't know where to start' I've got a couple of options for you. I've got sign-up sheets at the back. It's very simple. If you'd like to read the Bible with someone else, or if you'd like some Bible reading notes to help you understand- put your name and contact details on the appropriate sheet. And I'll get in touch with you.

Lastly, the Bible is personal. It's only when the Bible gets personal to us that it will change our lives, and stop being just information. *How is that possible?*

Firstly, we accept the Bible's authority over us. We don't cut out the bits we don't like. That's how we know we're not creating for ourselves a cardboard-cut out God. Let's suppose we say- I don't like the idea of a God of judgement. I'll ignore those bits. Or I don't want to have to radically rethink how I spend my money. I'll skip over the bits about money. Or I don't like what the Bible says about sex, so I'll write that off as primitive. If you stand over the Bible, at the end of the day, keeping it at arm's length or making yourself editor, you'll find that you have only worshipped yourself. But if *you let the Bible stand over you*, it will be difficult sometimes, because it won't tell you what you want to hear. But who ever said that God would? What it will do is change your life.

Most importantly- The Bible is personal, because it is about a person. Let's turn to our Luke reading. Jesus walks with two of his followers. It's Easter Sunday, but they don't know it- they know he died, but have only heard rumours he's alive. They don't know it's him. What Jesus does next is important. He convinces them that this is the way it has to be- that the Messiah has to die, and then rise again. And He uses the Bible. *Vs 27- beginning with Moses and all the prophets... he showed them that the whole Bible was about himself.* He shows how the Passover, Moses, David, the Prophets, the whole sweep of scripture- points to him, and is about him. This is where the Bible comes alive for us. It goes beyond information; we see the person (that is, who he is) and his work (that is, what he's done, is doing and will do) of Christ in every page. That's what will make your heart come alive as you read the Bible. That's what changes it from being a daily duty to a life-giving encounter with your Lord and Master. That's why this ties to everything we've been looking at these last few weeks- it's all about Him. *And so might we read, learn, trust and obey, because we trust we will see our risen Master. Amen.*