

Bible Sunday

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Blessed Lord,
who caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning:
help us so to hear them,
to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them
that through patience, and the comfort of your holy word,
we may embrace and for ever hold fast the hope of everlasting life,
which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.

My text may be found in Paul's second letter to his son in Christ, Timothy: 'All scripture is inspired by God and is useful' (3 v16)

It's good to be back. It is very good to be back with you again. For me, 2009 is a significant year. Back in early September, I passed a significant milestone: I had my sixtieth birthday. Sixty may well be the new forty but fact is there is no way I can think of myself as young anymore and even though I can kid myself I'm simply middle-aged, I should start to accept the simple fact I'm now old. This truth was told me on my last School trip to Venice by a 15-year-old boy from Owen's named after my favourite Italian coffee when he said to me sweetly, 'Sir, you remind me of my granddad.' A compliment indeed but the truth I fear. The second milestone I passed this month when I wrote my 1,000th sermon. Of course, I've preached many more since some are inevitably recycled but since I started studying to be a Reader back in 1980, I have written 1,000 different

sermons. As a Reader-in-training, I preached my first sermon on 'Creation and new life' on 24th October 1982 at St Paul's, East Ham where I had been worshipping since 1970. I preached the 1,000th sermon last week on St Luke at St Barnabas, Colchester where my friend, Father Richard Tillbrook, is the parish priest. At this rate, I doubt I shall reach my second millennium which will be kind on paper, ink and computer memory!

Central to preaching is the Bible. Each week, our Bible readings are determined by the Common Lectionary on a three year cycle and consist of a portion from the Old Testament, Psalms, the New Testament and the Gospels. These readings provide the basis for my sermons, the texts which inspire what I preach so that I may fulfil one of my duties as a priest in the Church of God: 'to proclaim the faith of the Church afresh in each generation'. Ours is a faith with more than two thousand years of history stretching back beyond the life of Christ to our Jewish roots. Not only is ours a historical faith but ours is a faith which is as relevant today as it will be in the future.

When I preach, I am making a central assumption about what inspires my preaching: that the Bible is the Word of God. What I believe is that God has inspired all scriptures to be written for our benefit. I believe that the Bible has been written down through the medium of men who were encouraged and informed by the Holy Spirit to write what is written. I don't believe it was divine dictation but I do believe that what we read has its origin in what God wants us to hear. Essentially, then, the Bible is God speaking to us and the real legacy of the

Reformation is that we have access today to the Word of God in contemporary vernacular translations.

If the Bible is the Word of God, and I do believe it is, then the Bible has authority for us to determine what we believe and to inform our actions. We are conscious, rational, moral individuals and the Bible can and should shape how we think and how we behave. What I assume each time I preach is that the Bible is fit for purpose and that the Bible helps to make us fit for purpose too.

The collect for Bible Sunday has a central injunction about us and how we should treat the Bible and that command is at the heart of today's sermon: that we should hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest. The list of verbs is impressive and points out what our particular duty is as faithful Christians. Firstly, we should hear scripture being read aloud in church. We should hear, give ear, listen to what is being said to us precisely because it is God who is speaking to us. Secondly, we should read what is written for ourselves. It is not only useful to follow what is being read to us by reading the passage with our own eyes but we should be actively reading the Bible for ourselves in our own time. In the Lord's Prayer, we ask to be given our daily bread: the Bible is part of a healthy daily diet for the Word of God is the food of God, the bread that sustains us spiritually as well as physically. Thirdly, we should mark what we hear and see. To mark is to pay due attention; to mark is note what we have heard and read; to mark is to remember so that in due time we can return to and benefit from what is written. Fourthly, we should learn what we hear and read; to learn does not necessarily mean to learn by rote, though had we learnt verses of scripture off by

heart as children to, we would now possess a great treasure store of quotations which would inform our faith. In this case, I think that learn may best be understood by a psychological definition of the word. Here, to learn means to take on board the information so that it leads to a change of behaviour. True learning in this sense, then, changes the way we think and act. Fifthly, lastly, we are called to inwardly digest: what a good metaphor, what an effective image for what we need to do. We need to mull over what we have heard, read, marked and learnt so that over time we come to reflect on what scripture means for us. We live in an age of fast food but truth is we need time to digest what we eat even if a Big Mac and French fries are served within seconds of our order.

What I want to leave with you today on Bible Sunday is this simple idea: that the Bible is fit for purpose and by our active engagement with the Bible, the Bible will make us fit for purpose too.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Parish Eucharist

St Mary the Virgin and All Saints, Potters Bar

25th October, 2009

H: Sermon 21: Bible Sunday

