

The Ministry of the Word

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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 today may be found in our reading from the Old Testament:

‘Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel.’ (2 Samuel 12 v7)

Nathan the prophet stands before David the king and in the name of the Lord of accuses him of committing adultery with Bathsheba, wife of Uriah the Hittite whose death in battle David has in fact contrived! Actually, it’s much better than that in that the man accusing David of wrong-doing is David himself because Nathan has come to David as the chief judge of Israel and asks for justice in the following case. He tells David of a rich man who, rather than use one of his many lambs for a feast, takes a cherished lamb from a poor man who only has the one. So the judgement of the king is against the king! What is so powerful, so memorable about this passage from the Second Book of Samuel, is the fact that Nathan says what he says in the name of the Lord and hence today’s text: ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel.’

You may remember last week that I said I was going to preach a six sermon series to clarify aspects of our service of Holy Communion. Last week, we looked at our preparation to worship God: first in silence, then with the Collect for Purity to prepare our hearts and minds and then with the General Confession and Absolution to cleanse us of our sense of guilt. Now, today, we are going to look at the first part of that worship: the Ministry of the Word.

I should like to consider two aspects both of which are based on the Word of God – the Bible.

Firstly, we have our readings from the Bible. There are four: one from the Old Testament; one from the Psalms; one from the New Testament; and one from the gospels. On reflection, four different readings may sound a lot but the question we could ask is ‘Why?’

The answer may be found in our Christian understanding of what the Bible is: put simply, we believe that the Bible is the Word of God and that the Bible is one of the ways, one of the clearest ways, that God can choose to speak to us today. We accept the Bible is written by people, probably mostly men who have been inspired to write down what God wants them to write. Not so much divine dictation, more like divine prompting. God knows what he wants said; the writer feels what God wants said. The words chosen are the contemporary words of the language and times they were written down: Greek or Hebrew that were translated into Latin and then into English. Next year, we celebrate the Quartercentenary of the Authorised Version of the Bible, the translation

commissioned by King James. For many generations it was considered the gold standard for translations with the cadences and language of William Shakespeare. But nowadays different versions abound and our pew Bible is the NRSV, considered by many scholars to be the best current translation available.

Our respect for the Bible is mirrored in the words used following the reading of the Old and New Testament. The Reader declares, 'This is the Word of the Lord' and we reply 'Thanks be to God'. It is a ringing declaration of what it is and we voice our gratitude, our thanks for receiving it. Respect is the key: we value what we hear because we accept it is valuable, useful, a guide to living a Christian life. Now I want to say clearly that as good Protestants, we are obliged to get our brains in gear and to think for ourselves. It is not sufficient to listen casually but we need to listen critically to what is being said, to ask what does it mean and what it might mean for me. Listening to the Bible, reading it for ourselves, is an active process of being engaged, of paying attention to God, hearing what he is saying to us.

Secondly, we have the sermon. The sermon is what you pay me for. The sermon is the opportunity for me as your priest to reflect on the word of God, to ask what God wants me to say to you this week, and to say it as clearly as I can in ways you can understand. The sermon begins in prayer and ends in prayer. And the underlying assumption is that I, like the prophet Nathan, as the preacher, am the mouthpiece of God, speaking the words God wants us to hear. Such a claim may sound outrageous, big-headed, that a man can claim to speak for God. What I am claiming for sermons is that ideally they should be inspired by the Holy Spirit and

be centred on the Word of God, bringing a clear message based on scripture in the context of the place and times in which we live. And you can judge, and you probably do judge, whether you are getting your money's worth.

And so we have the Ministry of the Word where the Word of God is heard through readings from the Bible and through a sermon based on the Word of God. It is designed to be beneficial, to encourage and support us in our Christian life.

May the seeds sown fall on fertile ground and bear good fruit in due season.

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

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's Dinard

13th June, 2010

H: Sermon 22: Word

