

'The comfort of your holy 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 eternal life
which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.

My text may be found in Paul's Letter to the Romans, chapter 15 and verse 4: 'For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.'

It's good to be back. Do you miss me? I miss you: the warm welcome of St Mary's – the light, the colour, the unmistakeable smell of incense. Absence is said to 'make the heart grow fonder' and I am fond of Potters Bar: my house, my garden and my church. But if you were ever to feel a sudden desire to hear me preach, because six months is an awfully long time to wait for the next 'fix', then there is an alternative to the drastic step of getting on a ferry or Ryanair and coming over to Dinard. All you have to do is to click onto the St Bartholomew's website where nearly a hundred of my most recent sermons are on line for you to read!

Sermons exist to make clear the Word of God. The only real justification in me spending time writing one and you spending time listening to one is that a sermon should say something interesting, something challenging about the Christian life. I've felt tired recently. I've not been too well with a viral-type infection that seemed to linger with the usual symptoms of feeling feverish, having a headache, then a sore throat, runny nose and a hacking cough. Nice! But in the readings appointed for three of the last four Sundays, I was struck by a theme of encouragement: on the 3rd October, from Paul's Second Letter to Timothy, the need 'to rekindle the gift of God that is within' us (1 v6); last week, from Luke's gospel, the 'need to pray always and not to lose heart' (18 v1); and this week from Romans, 'the encouragement of the scriptures' (15 v4).

I seemed to be hearing the same message in different ways: that our faith should be aglow with the light of Christ; that in us, our faith is like a fire burning within us and that we should nurture its life-cherishing and life-affirming qualities. And today, Bible Sunday, it is specifically the encouragement of the Word of God, on which I want to focus.

Encourage has its roots in French and in Latin: the word for heart in French is 'coeur' and to encourage literally means to make the heart stronger – it is to give us the heart to do what we have to do. Sometimes in teaching you can see when a pupil's heart is not in what he does. The trick is to try and connect him with what he is studying so that it has a relevance and an excitement for him. If a pupil knows what he wants to achieve, then the goal may be sufficiently motivating for him to want to do so.

Our goal is eternal life. Our challenge is to live proper Christian lives to the full, to bring the light and love of Christ to those with whom we come in contact. And the Bible is the source of what we believe and a motivation to do what we should do.

On the one hand, we can learn about the tenets of our faith: a belief in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We can appreciate the great milestones in the Christian story of our salvation: the Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension and Second Coming. We can accept that salvation is a gift of God, a grace freely given that comes to us simply because we have faith in Jesus as our Lord, that we believe that by his life and death our sins are forgiven and we can be at one with God.

On the other hand we can learn about how we should behave. We can learn to love our neighbour as we should love ourselves. All that we do should be informed by respect for the dignity and worth of all people who are created in the image of God. Our Christian life has a cost and though what it costs does not earn us eternal life but it is a vital essential mark that our faith is serious and a real motivation to act and to do.

Bible Sunday is a chance once a year to affirm the worth of the Word of God to the People of God. God is speaking to us and if we bother to pay attention and to take on board what is being said, then, both what Paul writes in Romans 15 and what we hear in today's collect will be true for us – that we can be encouraged,

that we can be given heart by being connected to God by the Word of God, even Jesus Christ, his Son, our Lord and Saviour.

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

24th October, 2010

H: Sermon 22: Comfort

