

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.

Our text this morning may be found in Nehemiah chapter 8 and verse 10:

‘. . . the joy of the Lord is your strength.’

What gives you energy ? What connects you, inspires you, fires you up ? Today's text **‘. . . the joy of the Lord is your strength.’** was sent to me by a friend, Rosemary Chard, who used to work at Owen's and who moved to the Isle of Skye with her husband, Ian, when they retired there back in 1987. She sent it me some twenty years later when I moved to Dinard. As soon as I read the verse, I smiled and promptly wrote it in the front the book I use to preach from. It encourages me with the thought that energy and enthusiasm can come from being a practising Christian.

Today is Bible Sunday when we remember the gift and importance of scripture. In church in Dinard I'm often asked by Catholics what is the difference between the Church of England and the Catholic Church. I usually smile and point to a pew Bible telling them that one of the fruits of the Reformation is the translation of scripture into English. That the language of the Bible and the language of our worship is the language the people back in Britain actually spoke. But of course, with Vatican 2 that's now true of Catholic churches throughout the world.

But the Holy Bible is one of the ways in which we can be connected to God and feel the joy of his presence in our lives. A book shop owner in Dinard is a member of the Eglise Réformée which now rejoices in the title L'Eglise Protestante Unie de France – if only it were since some Lutherans in Alsace still refuse to join the union ! He said to me with pride that his church is centred on scripture: that the Bible enjoys a central place in their church, in their worship, in their lives.

And certainly that is what we see in today's reading from Nehemiah from which our text comes. It's the time of the return to Jerusalem of the Children of Israel from their Exile in Babylon. The Temple is to be rebuilt; the people are being reminded of the Covenant between them and God by the reading aloud in public from the scrolls of the Law. On the first day of the seventh month, from early in the morning until midday, Ezra the priest read the Torah to the people and interpreted it to them. Not sure we could manage to stay focused for that long but it actually moved some of the people listening there to tears !

So why is the Bible special and to be valued by us ? Simply, essentially, because it is the Word of God and is one of the best ways that we can be connected to him, to hear him speak directly to us and to be encouraged and informed in our daily lives as Christians.

To have the Bible, to be able to read it for ourselves with understanding, is the fruit of the Reformation coupled with the invention of printing. The Bible can be there at our fingertips, easily available, within the reach and grasp of most literate folk. The problem – to be able to understand clearly what is written therein and what it might mean for us. And that’s where priests are useful, the clergy can earn their salary, because we can help you understand God’s word.

Of course, the Bible is not the only way God speaks to us: you know as well as I that in prayer and contemplation, through art, nature and other folk we can be connected with God. But today, when we celebrate the word of God on Bible Sunday, let me leave you with this image from Psalm 19 verse 10 where the Psalmist refers to scripture as being ‘**more to be desired than gold**’ and ‘**sweeter far than honey**’. Now is that good or what ?

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

*Preached at the Eucharist
St Mary the Virgin and All Saints, Potters Bar
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