

Word of Christ Dwell in you Richly Neh 8:1-4a; 8-12; Col 3:12-17; Mt 24:30-35

Introduction

A little girl was sitting with her grandmother, who had presented her with her first little children's Bible, in an easy-to-read translation, when she was very young.

Now, a decade or so later, the elderly lady was ready to spend a few sweet moments handing down the big old family Bible, in the time-honoured King James Version, to her only grandchild. Understandably excited, the youngster was asking a number of questions, both about the family members whose births and deaths were recorded therein, and about various aspects of the Scriptures themselves. Her grandmother was endeavouring to answer all the child's questions in terms she could understand, but the one that stopped her cold was this sincere inquiry:

"Which Virgin was the mother of Jesus? Was it the Virgin Mary, or the King James virgin?" We can sometimes feel very confused about the Bible – knowing on the one hand that it is a very important book – vital to our faith – and yet, on the other, so unsure about how to read or understand it, that we don't even try. Perhaps there is a Bible sitting on the shelf at home which hasn't been opened for some time?

How we approach the Bible

One of the things that is offered here at St James is the chance in Lent and Advent simply to read through whole books of the Bible in a sitting, taking it in turns to read out loud. At the very least, it's a chance to expose ourselves to God's word even if it perhaps sends you away thinking about the meaning of what's been read. Maybe the most familiar way we are used to hearing the Bible being read is in the small portions we share, printed as extracts, in our weekly pew leaflet. Public reading of the Scriptures was something that Nehemiah did when God's people returned to their home land and began to rebuild the ruins of Jerusalem. Nehemiah, as one of their leaders, knew it was important to have a spiritual foundation to their country's life, as well as literally relaying the stones for the city walls and buildings. So we know the Bible is important, but perhaps we are less confident about how to handle it, which may put us off trying to read it on a regular basis. Do you read the Bible every day? What might be the reasons you find it difficult?

A Sunday School teacher asked her children to draw pictures of their favourite Bible stories. She was puzzled by one boy's picture, which showed four people on an airplane, so she asked him which story it was meant to represent. "The flight to Egypt," said the boy.

"I see ... And that must be Mary, Joseph, and Baby Jesus," the teacher said. But who's the fourth person?"

"Oh, that's Pontius-the Pilot.

The Bible may seem a very obscure and hard to understand book – and it's true, if you started with good intentions to read it through like a novel from start to finish, you'd probably get stuck somewhere around the middle of Deuteronomy. It's not really meant to be read like

that. But also, it does help if we have people, books or reliable internet articles to help explain the meaning – like those who read the books of the law to the people in Nehemiah’s day. They read it out loud but explained the meaning as they went along.

The Bible is special

It may help to remember how special the Bible is. It is still the world’s best-seller (though of course, that doesn’t necessarily mean it is read the most!) It has been translated into more languages than any other book in history – and this work has cost some people their lives! The Bible, its teachings and sayings have influenced our language and European civilization. Without thinking we may say things like “cast your pearls before swine” or “a law unto themselves” or “a wolf in sheep’s clothing”. We may often see something like the 10 commandments as a foundation for our sense of morality – not just for those who believe in the Bible but for everyone. But despite agreeing that the Bible is very special and should have a special place in our lives, we still find it difficult to pick up, read every day or to ponder its meaning. So it may help to understand what the Bible is and how we are to understand it.

1. The Bible may look like one, long book but in fact it’s a collection of 66 books. It would be more accurate to think of it as a small library with a variety of different sorts of literature. It has books of history, law, prophecy, poetry, wise sayings in the OT. The NT is made up of letters, some history, revelation and a unique type of literature: the four gospels. Just like you would read different library books in different ways the Bible’s books are all meant to be read in different ways. To use an illustration: you wouldn’t read a telephone directory like a bedtime story, or a recipe book like a novel.

2. As well as being like a library, it was also put together over a very lengthy period and was originally written in 3 different languages: Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. Languages work in different ways and it is important to remember that although we read the Bible in English – God isn’t an Englishman! Unless you study the original languages of the Bible, you will always be reading a translation, an interpretation of the original Bible. Interpretations are always open to questioning and the very act of working out how to translate from one language into a very different language brings up many questions about how to capture the meaning – if you can tell what the original meaning might be.

3. That is not to say that you can’t rely on the Bible or never know what the original meaning might be. We believe the Bible to be inspired. It is inspired by the Holy Spirit. Though there may be things that don’t match up or agree at first sight, the Bible is consistent – it does all ultimately tell the same story, coming from the same source and heading to the same endpoint. So it is reliable, even though it may bring up many questions.

4. So is the Bible the word of God? We believe it is, and we believe it is inerrant – that means it won’t lead you astray. But here we have to be very careful what we mean by saying the Bible is the word of God. Unlike the Qur’an, which Moslems believe to be literally the actual words of Allah, dictated by the Angel Gabriel, Christians don’t believe the Bible to be literally the words of God. Rather, we believe the Bible *contains* the word of God. If you like –

the way in which the Bible speaks to us of God is more like something that holds the truth God wants us to understand, believe and live by.

In that sense, the Bible is open to interpretation – we have to wrestle with its meaning, working out with the best of our intelligence, the most faithful believing heart and with our motivations open to the Spirit's guidance what God might be saying to us in each fresh age. That does open us to the accusation that we can make the Bible say what we want; or that something like the Qur'an is more reliable because it is literally Allah's words. But this is where we have to remember the right place the Bible has in Christian belief.

Christians, like Moslems and Jews, follow a revealed religion. Revelation is vital to our faith, and the Bible is for us the revealed word of God. But we also believe that Jesus is the *fullest* revelation of God to us. Whereas the Bible is the *written* revelation of God and his message to us, Jesus is the *living* Word, revealing the nature and person of God to us in human flesh. One interfaith expert put it very clearly to me once: the Christian equivalent to the Moslem Holy Book, the Qur'an, is not the holy book of Christians, the Bible, even though it is our holy book. It is Jesus – the full and final revelation of God to us: the Word made flesh.

Conclusion

In this sense, then, the Bible points to Jesus: the written Word leads us to the living Word. As St Paul urged the Colossians, we are to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly. Or, as Jesus put it, when we see signs in nature about the next season coming, like the leaves emerging to tell us summer is on its way, we see clear signs in the Bible, pointing us to Jesus. One of the ways I find it helpful to think of the Bible is that it is a record of God's relationship with his people down the ages. Inspired people made a record of how they experienced God. This rang true with their faith communities and continued to be true for them ever since. That record, inspired by the Spirit of God, is meant to deepen our relationship with God, so that as it rings true for us, we find ourselves becoming part of the everlasting story, that eternal community of those through whom God continues to tell his story. If we neglect that story we will quickly lose a sense of who we are and to whom we belong – we will not live by those words of Christ which will not pass away.