

*St Brandon's, Sermon for 28th October 2018,
Isaiah 55:1-11, 2 Timothy 3:14 – 4:5, John 5:36b-47*

Bible Sunday

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In preparing for today's sermon, I was taken back to my ordination service and various commitments I had to make, one was "*Will you faithfully minister the doctrine and sacraments of Christ as the Church of England has received them, so that the people committed to your charge may be defended against error and flourish in the faith?*" I had said "Yes", and hoped for the best!

Today's readings go to the heart of 'being defended against error and flourishing in the faith'. Paul's letter to Timothy is concerned with people hearing false doctrine – the underlying beliefs about God – and the teaching power of scripture, which is to be adhered to even when not popular. Isaiah wonderfully sings to us about how freely and richly the word is given; given for a purpose that raises us up, and promises an everlasting covenant through David, urging us to seek the Lord.

In the gospel reading, however, Jesus is getting cross with a certain group of Jews, because of their failure to seek. They've read Isaiah, they've seen Jesus at work – the work of healing miracles and transformational teaching that released people from spiritual, physical, and mental disorder and brought them to new life – yet they are not making the connection. It should be apparent that this sort of work is God's work – it has miraculous dimensions, it goes way beyond human experience and expectation, so, he argues, it should be evidence enough that he is from God. What's more, God has been saying it too!

God has been saying it to them through the scriptures. But they are not prepared to listen and believe that he is what the scriptures are talking about: everlasting covenant through David; he is the source of eternal life: he is the blessing. Its as if they think they can be blessed by the **scripture** instead of by him.

It was hard for them to see what was right under their nose, perhaps to over-think, be cautious, not want to be made a fool. Jesus is acknowledging that they have never heard God's voice or seen his form - that makes it harder - but its also that they do not have his word abiding in them.

It's the word abiding in them that's going to enable them to see God. And when they see God, they will be better able to see him, and visa versa.

That's what Jesus wants them to get from scripture.

Having the word abiding in you is a much bigger concept than learning something off by heart, being familiar with, even very knowledgable about the content of the scriptures.

Abiding is an activity, we use it to express what we do in our place of abode: the place where we live, rest, return.

'Abiding' has an open-ended quality which is perhaps why the hymn 'Abide in me' is a comfort for many at a funeral.

When we say we 'abide by the rules, or the recommendations' we are accepting rules and working within them, but to have the word abiding in you suggests something bigger and more alive; an active working in alignment with ... The Word, which is another name for Jesus.

To have the word abiding in you is to have Jesus' Spirit alive in you.

The Jews to whom Jesus was speaking might have been very pious and able to keep the rules as they are recorded in scripture: the ten commandments from Moses, for example. But I think Jesus is making a distinction between simply keeping the rules and having faith: the word abiding in them, to fully reveal the message Moses is bringing about Jesus' coming.

Our bible, the Christian Bible, has expanded from the Jewish scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, to include writings about Jesus: his life, works and teachings, and a lot about his death, and the significance of this death and resurrection and ascension as it came to be revealed and understood over the following 2-3 centuries: The New Testament.

Those writings that are included in the New Testament were decided by a Council of the church, late in the fourth century, to ensure that the foundational teaching was unalterable. That protects the original material from evolving into something miles away from the original.

However, it does mean that we are always referring to the authority of something that has been formed in antiquity.

That is not to say its frozen, or dead but it does contain aspects, of the culture and way of thinking and expressing social norms that are of their era. When we read a modern translation of the bible, the modern language can disguise the ancientness of the writing and we are apt to forget that people are speaking from a foreign time and foreign land.

It does us and the bible no favours to forget that.

That is when we feel confused, offended, tripped up by practises and 'norms' that we cannot relate to. Think back just a few decades to the 1950's and 60's, it was not uncommon to hear

quite racist comments and expressions, quite different expectations of what 'woman's work' might entail. The attitudes and expressions have changed even in that time. Hardly surprising the writings from two and three thousand years back have alien expressions.

Despite this, they are the accounts of people who, in great faith, have interpreted their world through the actions of God, as they best can see it, and the responses they have made to God's messages to them, as best they could.

Recorded in a whole variety of ways: from rule books to love poetry, each tells the work of God in its own way. And it helps us to follow it better if we recognise that mode of writing, and the purpose of the writer in making that particular record.

There is such a width of modes of expression that it makes it hard to say we either love or hate the bible as a whole.

I expect there would be a general murmuring of gloom if Numbers or Leviticus were compulsory reading.

Conversely, many couples looking for readings for their wedding are surprised to come across the Song of Solomon and find much resonance with the love poetry in that.

If the Bible contains such seemingly alien and rule-orientated sections, or such awful passages as those that tell of mass killings attributed by the writer to God, can we, should we, take all of it as seriously, or should we sit light to some of it?

Some passages are not included in our three year cycle of Sunday readings, they have been removed to enable us to focus on what is edifying.

Is that right and fair?

Well, that takes me back to the phrase I used at the beginning, that the task of ministry is to defend people against error and enable them to flourish in the faith. As ministers, we pray we will be able to help the living word be heard, the word of God that is useful and will be life-giving, inspiring us to live and work with a true faith.

Just how much of the bible is able to do that is a judgement of each minister, a view that varies from church to church along with the degree to which the bible is held to be the absolute word of God: literal and factual, and how much it is seen to be the inspired word of God with a fair influence of human content. It was as impossible for the person writing the record to be other than themselves, with their own character, life experience and turn of phrase as it is for us, reading it.

If we are extra sensitive to a particular issue, we will naturally focus more on those references: the feminist reader will feel the same text as considerably harsher than a non-feminist would; its inevitable, its human nature.

The need for the focus and emphasis to be on the passages that have been found through centuries of faith to speak most truly and helpfully about God's purposes for us and best illustrate his relationship with us and the trinity, has been identified as a responsibility of the church from soon after it first established. Paul is, therefore, writing to Timothy, urging him to adhere closely to the truth of the sacred writings, knowing scripture's purpose for teaching and equipping the people of God.

Also, with the threat of other teachers making up false messages that are easier on the ears, less challenging, to adhere to the received, sound doctrine, however unwelcome.

Now, we hear and see the truth in that message.
But is it an entirely honest and true piece of writing?

Scholars have largely agreed that it is not actually a letter written by Paul to Timothy. It is widely held that this was written 25 - 75 years after Paul's death, when the church was established but very liable to be overly influenced by leaders bringing in their own agendas. The church community needed to be protected from being led astray: from wrong teaching, from 'error', and, as by then, Paul's writings and teachings had gained great authority, a new letter was written by someone, complete with fake personal references and endearments to give it a bona fide feel, and slipped into the pile of documents that subsequently formed the bible.

Does the possibility of this make it any less inspired by God?
Any more suspect as faith teaching?

Faith and the bible are complex.

We must be prepared to work at understanding the bible's contents, and we must be ready to faithfully regard it as our greatest faith resource: as the living word, capable of revealing to us all things necessary for eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Ultimately.

And on an everyday basis, the living word that guides, holds, corrects and informs us in that mysterious way that faith operates.

One example of scripture as the living Word is the inspiring and real experience we have when the text of a passage speaks straight into a situation and shows us something new about it. That affirms something in us about God's loving presence and can confirm a direction we might take.

It is a mystery: just try sharing the same passage with a group of people and nearly everyone will find a different bit speaks to them, gives them a particular new understanding.

When we do this at the start of an smdt meeting we find it hugely helpful as the different hearings, which we share, add together to make a yet deeper and bigger picture, and stay with us as we work through the meeting.

Let's encourage one another in the reading and digesting of the bible: what are the reading schemes and reflections that you use? Like the Jews '*we have never heard his (God's) voice or seen his form*' but we can have him alive and abiding in us through faith in the scriptures, that is a good place to encounter Jesus as the living word.

Amen