

Sermon for Sunday 23 October 2022 – Bible Sunday

Very Revd Philip Buckler

Isaiah 45.22–25; Romans 15.1–6; Luke 4.16–24

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

How sad it is to see what we do with the things of God. The very gifts that should bind us together have often become bones of contention and division. We need only think of this sacrament of Holy Communion, the fellowship that joins us with our Lord and his first disciples in the upper room at the Last Supper. This, what should have been a focus for unity, has often become a point for division and disagreement, leading to one group not being, as we say, in communion, with another, or even the act of excommunication, refusing the sacrament to those who believe or act differently. Then we might think on this Bible Sunday of the gift of the Holy Scriptures.

The Bible, which should be a keystone of faith, has all too often become the point of division, with different interpretations, bolstering a variety of beliefs. I think of a bonfire burning just outside the old St Paul's Cathedral. Its flames were fed by copies of the New Testament, translated into English by William Tyndale. The Bishop of London, Cuthbert Tunstall, had ordered these heretical books, as he saw them, to be burned, and the Archbishop of the day set about seizing or buying up all remaining copies. They were seen as a threat to the Catholic Church, giving potentially different understanding to ordinary people who could now read them.

There is a delicious irony in the fact that now one of the greatest treasures at St Paul's is a copy of Tyndale's New Testament, one of only three remaining copies in existence today. When I was studying theology, one of the very first lecture courses we had was entitled 'The Use and Abuse of The Bible'. From the very start of our studies, it was important to get to grips with the approach to the foundation documents of our Christian faith, the many writings that make up what we call the Bible. Today, the last Sunday after Trinity, has in recent times been called Bible Sunday, as our collect reminded us: 'Blessed Lord, who have 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 comfort of your Holy Word, we may embrace and forever hold fast the hope of everlasting life.'

Now, one of the key principles in digesting the Scriptures properly is to endeavour to understand the 'zits in labour', as the German theologians coined a term meaning the setting in life or the context of a particular piece of writing. So, for example, last Tuesday we celebrated the Feast of St Luke and we could recall how the Gospel, attributed to Luke the Physician, emphasises the healing ministry and the miracles of Jesus, with the context of being written for a Gentile audience. The Gospel and its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles, show how the Christian message began in and around Jerusalem and moved to Rome; from the religious centre of the world, Jerusalem, to the political centre of the empire, Rome. Quite often, the context of our readings is hard for modern minds to accept.

Yet this is something we share, not just in matters of faith, but also in our political history. This coming Tuesday, we mark the 607th anniversary of the Battle of Agincourt, a significant battle of the 15th century, but also one of legend, as it saw victory snatched from defeat despite the overwhelming odds against it. Hallowed by history and Shakespeare, it might seem worthy of remembrance, yet many today question any celebration, pointing out that in today's world, the event would likely see King Henry V appear before the European court as a war criminal. His slaughter of prisoners of war makes even the bloodthirsty battles of today and his day seem innocent. Yet strategically, it could be argued as necessary, albeit repugnant to our way of thinking. Of course, whenever we get into matters of warfare or other such complexities, one would need to start somewhere else if wanting to be innocent. That is the tragedy of involvement.

Now, it's not hard to find comparisons between Henry and Agincourt, and the tribes of Israel, God's chosen people establishing their place in the Promised Land by destroying all who stood in their way, apparently in response to God's direct command. To read in the Old Testament of such slaughter as being God's will is shocking, if not entirely unfamiliar. It may be an earlier echo of much of the brutality exhibited by various groups in our own time, and that horrendous phrase ethnic cleansing. All this plays neatly into the hands of those who would argue that religion is at the heart of most wars and consequently should be dismissed. In fact, it can be better argued that politics is at the heart of all warfare and therefore politics should be abolished. Perhaps we should speak of neither religion nor politics and live life as one eternal well-mannered dinner party.

Now, leadership is very much on our minds at present in our own political turmoil. In the Bible, we find all sorts of leaders, male and female, in the Book of Judges, good and bad. In the Book of Kings, they are assessed as doing what is right or evil in the sight of the Lord, that is being open or closed to God. But even the finest leader of the Old Testament, King David, was deeply flawed. And then, of course, in the New Testament, we see the ultimate leader, God himself in human form, in Jesus Christ. Yet he is rejected by fallen humanity and put to death on a cross. No easy answers, then, for our present dilemma.

The Bible is more than just a reference book to solve every problem. Our Gospel reading this morning tells of Jesus claiming a part in the development of the understanding of faith expressed in the Hebrew Scriptures. 'Today,' he said, 'this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' The New Testament takes this further as God's revelation of himself in the figure of Jesus shows us a very different picture of God's love for his people. The Scriptures record what God has done for his people in many different times past. The understanding of God and his ways is forever developing for the Church over the centuries, as it does for the individual over a lifetime. Our sight, so often blinded by self-interest and prejudice, needs to be restored afresh, to be open to see Christ in our midst today. A number of the current issues in society at present - warfare, gender, slavery and many others - are not fully explored in the Scriptures of old. But the Scriptures provide encouragement to wrestle with such matters. As Paul wrote in our second reading this morning, 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.

So we are encouraged to negotiate life, this precious gift entrusted to us to explore and to use creatively, encouraged and inspired by the Scriptures to see how God has led his people in very different times and situations. Then we are challenged to see intelligently how he might be leading us today. It is both exciting and humbling to use the gifts entrusted to us, the gifts of intelligence and thoughtfulness, to find hope and vision in what is often a very confusing world.

Amen.