

*Isaiah 55.1-11; 2 Timothy 3.14-4.5; John 5.36b-47*

I'm gradually getting to know my way around but find I'm very dependent on satnav on my phone, especially when I venture out of the parish. This week I had to go to the Diocesan office in Rotherham and it was all going smoothly until on my way home, I got a message to say that my phone's battery was low. I had this sudden sense of panic that I would be lost in the middle of Sheffield with no idea where I was going or how I would get home. In the end the battery lasted long enough for me to get to somewhere I recognised but it made me realise that I was a bit too dependent on technology.

Today is Bible Sunday. And there is a danger that we can sometimes treat the Bible like satnav. We use the bits we need to get us where we want to go. We absorb short passages of scripture in our services in short gobbets without necessarily understanding the wider landscape of the Bible, the context in which it is set. The references. The topography. If we are reading the Bible on our own we tend to go to the same places, just as we tend to take the same journeys. We may recognise the twenty third Psalm or I Corinthians 13 but we tend to avoid Leviticus or the Book of Job.

Our knowledge of the Bible will vary but there will be some of us who don't know our John 1 from our John or apocalyptic from the apocrypha. Bible Sunday is an invitation to all of us to engage afresh with our foundational document, the word of God, and to think about how it applies to our lives.

The Bible is many things. It is not really one book but a whole library. It contains history, poetry, songs, wisdom, law, parables and whole variety of reflections on God and what it means to be his people. All of these things help to build up a picture of the story of salvation and help us to find our place within it. And it's not always simple. There are other churches that manage to distil the good news down to what they see as a core message, an easily followed road map. But the Bible is bigger than that. It is messy sometimes. Complicated. It doesn't always agree with itself. Different writers have different perspectives on the same events, particularly in the Gospels. But it is still the word of God and it has enormous richness. We can go back again and again to the same passage and get something new out of it each time.

We won't always agree with what we read. The Bible should be challenging. And we can't just apply what was written in the first century lock stock and barrel to our context. But there should be a dialogue between our lives, our world and scripture. It is in the wrestling, the pondering and the praying that we discover what God's word to us means for us in Ranmoor in the twenty first century.

In our Gospel today, Jesus accuses the religious elite of his day of not knowing their Bibles properly. If they had read the Hebrew scriptures, wrestled with them, pondered them and prayed them then they would have recognised him as the messiah. Part of Jesus' mission was to put faith back in the hands of ordinary people. He asked people what they wanted rather than telling them what they needed. He said things like 'your faith will make you well' rather than 'I will make you well'. He made people responsible for their own discipleship. And we see that pattern repeating itself. The Reformation in sixteenth century Europe tried to do something similar. In the Middle Ages the Christian faith had become dominated by a priestly elite. The word of God was not accessible to most people because it was written and read in Latin.

One of the main movements of the Reformation was to translate the Bible into the language of the people. And that was an explosive thing to do. But it enabled people to really think about their own lives and what it meant to be followers of Jesus.

And so we have Bibles in English in our pews this morning. Most of us will have at least one Bible on our shelves at home. But a bit like democracy, once you make something freely available it can lose its value. People start to take it for granted. Bibles lie unread. And where they are read it is often by a few people in church rather than by the whole people of God as a regular discipline.

The Bible is too important a document to be left on the shelf. There are many in our society who have grown up without any knowledge or understanding of the Christian faith. People have lost sight of the Christian origins of so many of our values and institutions. And many more feel lost, hopeless, desperately in need of good news. This can make some vulnerable to fundamentalists who hijack sacred texts to support their own narrow agendas, alienating many who see religion as more trouble than it is worth.

We need to keep the Bible in the public sphere and to do that we need to be more confident navigators of its texts. And some of us may need some help with that. And obviously I am here to help and so are Alison and the retired clergy and members of the study group. We have a library with some really helpful commentaries. And there are lots of Bible reading notes available in paper form and on line. And we also have St Peter's College which is an online learning community run by the Diocese. It has lots of resources and is really easy to register with. So I do encourage you to look at it if you use the internet. If you are going to start reading the Bible regularly, don't just start at the beginning and work your way through because you'll probably get stuck in Leviticus or something. Start with a Gospel. At the moment we are reading Mark on most Sundays. It's the shortest. And from December we will be reading the Gospel of Luke. Or take one of Paul's letters, perhaps the Letter to the Romans.

One of the things about being dependent on satnav is that if someone asked me for directions I'd be no use at all. As disciples of Jesus Christ we need to be able to help other people, our friends, our families, our colleagues, to discover something about the Christian faith. We need to be able to give a reason for the hope that is in us. We need to be confident navigators. And to do that we need to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the riches of God's word. Amen.