

Sunday 27 October 2024

Bible Sunday



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The Collect for Bible Sunday

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,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

All Amen.

First reading

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah

Ho, everyone who thirsts,
 come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
 come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
 without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
 and your labour for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
 and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
 listen, so that you may live.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
 my steadfast, sure love for David.
See, I made him a witness to the peoples,
 a leader and commander for the peoples.
See, you shall call nations that you do not know,
 and nations that do not know you shall run to you,
because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,
 for he has glorified you.

Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Isaiah 55:1-11

This is the Word of the Lord

All Thanks be to God.

Second reading

A reading from the Second Letter of St Paul to Timothy

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears,

they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

2 Timothy 3:14—4:5

This is the Word of the Lord

All Thanks be to God.

Gospel reading

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John

All Glory to you O Lord.

Jesus said, 'The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form, and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent.

'You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. I do not accept glory from human beings. But I know that you do not have the love of God in you. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; if another comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God? Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?'

John 5:36b-end

This is the Gospel of the Lord

All Praise to you O Christ.

Sermon

It's almost traditional at events that mark an ending to sing Frank Sinatra's *My Way*, perhaps because it's the way it starts, '... and now, the end is near ..' and it ends, '... I did it my way!' I won't sing this song because its sentiments are the exact opposite of Christian. It ought to end, 'I did it *God's* way!' but, straightaway, we sense a problem: What *is* God's way. We often don't know God's way because we don't know God.

I wonder who God is to you? It can be a tricky question, particularly when we start the business of actually thinking through our beliefs. For example, I remember talking to a man who called himself an atheist. 'I don't believe in God!' he said. I asked him to describe the God in whom he did not believe and, having heard him through, I had to say to him, 'I don't believe in your God either.' His God was so small, but mine is too.

Our faith has to be mature, and big enough. I wonder if you know the poem by Ted Hughes called *The Pike*. What's so clever is the way he describes the joy of finding the perfect words to describe a pike he'd seen swimming in the river near his home. After quite a long time of wrestling, he felt that he'd got the words just right. He felt really pleased with himself. The poem was good because it described the pike. The problem was that he saw the pike again that same afternoon and realised that however 'pike-like' was the creature he'd described within the poem, he'd caught no more than a caricature. It was a like a black-and white photo when placed beside the real thing. And similarly, so is our idea of God. The problem is that we cannot see God in the usual ways.

That is why we need to read the Bible. The problem is that anyone who has read the Bible but has also encountered the living God will feel this same sense of frustration that Ted Hughes felt when trying to describe a pike. Our task is to learn how to progress from the words on the printed page, to see them, see through and beyond them, to the God who inspired them, and thence allow God Himself to speak to us.

There are nearly two hundred metaphors for God. In 1 John we read that God is love. In Genesis and Revelation, He is light. In Hebrews we learn that our God is a consuming fire. In the Gospels, the metaphors get quite daring: He is a gate, a shepherd, a bridegroom, an unjust judge, and so on. The list seems endless. But each in its own right is so over-simplified as to be quite simply wrong. Of course, God is not a consuming fire! Of course He is not an unjust judge! Of course He is not light! Of course He is not a shepherd! He is all of them and He none of them.

So what do we do? You may know the story of Michelangelo and a lump of marble. He was desperately poor at the time, and went to a quarry asking, in effect,

‘Have you got a piece of marble I can have on the cheap?’ He was told that a lump was available and he could have it for nothing. ‘Why?’ asked the sculptor. ‘Because’, said the quarry owner, ‘it was such a unwieldy shape that no-one could use it. It is simply the wrong shape for building; none of the local artists could find a use for it.’

Michelangelo took that lump of marble and made from it one of his most famous sculptures, that of David. He was later asked how such a carving from such a seemingly useless lump of stone. ‘Simple,’ he said. ‘I saw the figure locked away in the marble. It was my job to liberate him from the stone.’

Our task is similar. We take our vision of God. Some of it comes from the Bible, some from friends, intuition, and so on. Much of it in time will come through our prayer. And, like Michelangelo, we chip away the rubble and throw away the dross. We throw away each tiny misconception about God. ‘God is an old man with a long white beard’—we hack off the offending cliché; ‘God is a sugar daddy who answers all our prayers to suit us’— another cliché is thrown away. True: we’re left with a smaller lump of marble, so the metaphor doesn’t work completely. ‘God is judgmental, waiting to pounce on us each time we commit a sin, however small and trivial’— and we hack off another silly idea. Each time we remove a cliché, however subtle, the vision of God that remains will approximate yet more clearly to the true God.

But we’re not like Michelangelo who knew what shape he wanted in his marble; we are always searching, always wanting to find a better way of describing God. This process of growth in discernment requires a lifetime. No one will ever find a true image of God this side of the grave. But we are to seek him with all our might. As today’s reading from Isaiah 55 says, ‘Seek Him while he may be found,’ that is, while we’re still living.

In fact, the reading from Isaiah describes exactly what we’ve been talking about this morning. It says in verse 8, ‘My thoughts are not your thoughts. Nor My ways your ways.’ If our ways *were* His and we were like God, then we *would* be able to describe Him and the words in the Bible *would* be able to describe Him. We could read a single passage from the Bible and say, ‘Ah! Now I know Him!’

We must seek God with the expectation that we *will* eventually find something of Him, and that ‘something’ ought to be growing, by which I mean becoming clearer, more distinct, more real. So I must ask you, is your image of God growing? Is it bigger, clearer, than it used to be?

Since I joined you 15 years ago, I have prayed and preached nearly 3000 times. I have thought and lead Bible studies. Over this time my vision God has grown immeasurably. I’m therefore going to end on a more personal note than usual and say how my vision of God has changed over these fifteen years. Being Bible Sunday, I will now read a list of favourite Bible verses. I hope you see a pattern:

- John 13:34 Jesus said, 'A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.'
- John 13:35 Jesus said, 'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.'
- Romans 12:10 Be devoted to one another in love.
- Romans 13:8 Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another; whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.
- 2 Corinthians 13:11 The God of love and peace will be with you.
- Galatians 5:13 Serve one another humbly in love.
- Ephesians 4:2 Bear with one another in love.
- 1 Thessalonians 4:9 Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other.
- 2 Thessalonians 1:3 We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing.
- Hebrews 10:24 Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love.
- 1 Peter 1:22 Love one another deeply, from the heart.
- 1 Peter 3:8 All of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another.
- 1 Peter 5:14 Greet one another with a kiss of love.
- 1 John 3:11 This is the message you heard from the beginning: we should love one another.
- 1 John 3:23 This is God's command: believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another as he commanded us.
- 1 John 4:7 Let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.
- 1 John 4:11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.
- 1 John 4:12 No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.
- 2 John 1:5 I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another.

And now the end is near. Let's do it *His* way.