

Sermon Bible Sunday (written by Judy Wedderspoon)

2 Timothy 3:14 – 4:5 and John 5: 36b - end

As today is Bible Sunday, we must take the opportunity to think about the Bible, the record which has been handed down to us of God's revelation of himself both in history and in the present. Reading the record of that revelation is vital to our Christian discipleship. We need to "read, mark and inwardly digest" what it tells us. But it isn't that easy, is it? We must bear in mind the exhortation of the first commandment, to love God with our minds. That brings us straight to the first difficult question: How should we read the Bible?

Both our readings this morning refer to "the scriptures". For Jesus, as for the writer of the Letter to Timothy, "the scriptures" meant the Jewish scriptures, which have come down to us as the first and longest part of our Bible, the Old Testament. But for us, "the scriptures" means the whole of our Bible, both the Old and the New Testaments. Our minds have to accept that fact. We as Christians must read the whole Bible, realising that the record of God's self-revelation culminates in the supreme once-for-all revelation of himself in Jesus Christ. The whole of the Old Testament points to him, to his coming. The New Testament makes clear the glory and greatness of that revelation.

But we cannot, must not close our minds to the problems of reading the Bible which arise as a consequence of modern scholarship. For example, both the letters to Timothy and also the letter to Titus open by stating that these letters are written by Paul. But scholars now believe, for good and cogent reasons, that Paul did not write these letters, that they were written later by a disciple who borrowed Paul's name to give authority to what he was saying. In those days this practice of writing under a borrowed name, known as pseudepigraphy, was recognised and acceptable.

Now does it matter to us whether or not Paul actually wrote what we heard read this morning? In one way, yes, it does, particularly if we find conflicts with what Paul says in other letters known to have been written by him and we wonder how to resolve these differences. But in another way no, it doesn't matter. Those three letters have all been included in our Bible, for us to read and learn from them. That is what really matters.

That brings us to a second difficult question: is everything in the Bible to be taken literally? The writer to the letter Timothy says, as we have heard, "all scripture is inspired by God". I believe that to be true. But I also know that God did not sit down with a pen and write it. "Inspired by God" does not mean, cannot mean "written by God". All scripture was written down by human beings, almost certainly all by men. God created the phenomena of time and change. The men who wrote were conditioned by their times and their circumstances. If you were to take every verse

literally, you should not be listening to me today. The writer of the first letter to Timothy says unequivocally “I permit no woman to teach... she will be saved by childbearing” [1 Tim. 2: 12 and 15]. That was written in the days when women had no access to education and were entirely subject to men.

But time and circumstances have moved on. No one would now deny the significance of the teachings contained in Julian of Norwich’s Revelations of Divine Love, nor of those contained in the writings of St Teresa of Avila (neither of whom bore a child), nor indeed of those contained in the writings in our own generation of the great theologian Morna Hooker. What the writer of First Timothy said reflects the inspiration of many centuries ago. It has to be read in that light.

And there is indeed much for us to learn from our reading from Second Timothy. I appreciate particularly this passage: “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.” That is as true now as it was then, and dealing with it calls for all the skill and patience described by the writer.

This morning’s Gospel reading comes immediately after Jesus’ healing on the Sabbath of the sick man at the pool of Bethesda. The Jewish authorities started persecuting Jesus for doing this. Jesus’ reply was “My Father is still working, and I am working”. So the Jewish authorities sought to kill him, both for breaking the Sabbath and for calling God his Father.

To which Jesus replies, as we have heard; “The very works that I am doing testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me” [Jn.5: 36]. God in Jesus is revealed in those works of love, mercy and power. That is the first evidence of the presence of God in Jesus. The second piece of evidence is more abstract. If those Jewish authorities believed Jesus’ teaching, they would hear God speaking in their own hearts.

Instead, they search the Jewish scriptures. To them, the written words are more important than the evidence of their eyes. But they find in those scriptures only what they want to find. They cannot see that those scriptures point to Jesus. Their minds are shut against the truth.

Jesus’ response to these hostile authorities is comprehensive. He says: I come from God. The works I do testify to the truth of that claim. God himself testifies to the truth of my claim. If you had God in your hearts, you would hear his voice, but you do not hear it, because you do not have God in your hearts. And Moses, the Lawgiver whom you most revere, also testified to the truth of my claim, but you do not understand and believe even what Moses said. It is he who will accuse you before God for your unbelief.

And that tells us much about how we should read the Bible. We must read with open and intelligent minds, accepting that it is all right to ask questions. We must also accept that we will not always be able to find answers, sometimes because the answers are lost in the mists of history, but also because some of the answers are shrouded in mystery which we will not be able to comprehend while we are bound by earthly limits. But at all times when we read we must be open and ready to perceive the manifold and varied evidence of God's self-revelation over the centuries. So on this Bible Sunday let us give thanks for our Bible. Let us give thanks for all who heard God's inspiration and put together this record for us. But above all let us give thanks that we have a God who in his grace and mercy has chosen to make himself known to us, and for his greatest self-revelation in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.