

30 January 2011 (Circuit Service)

Introduction to the Preaching series February 2011

I want to begin this evening with a little general knowledge quiz, and to see if you can complete some quotations for me. Just a few! And here they are:-

Am I my brother's [keeper]?

Behold Esau my brother is a hairy man, and I am [a smooth man].

Hope deferred [maketh the heart sick].

A living dog is better [than a dead lion].

Where your treasure is, [there will your heart be also].

The word of God is quick and powerful, and sharper [than any two-edged sword].

I'm sure you don't need me to tell you that all of those quotations came from the Bible, and all were taken from the King James or Authorised Version, which is celebrating its four hundredth birthday this year. The BBC marked this special year by broadcasting a series of readings from the King James Bible on I think the second Sunday of this month. It was a real treat to hear some of our best-known actors – people like Samuel West and Emilia Fox - reading some pretty sizeable chunks of Scripture on the radio, and it surprised me how familiar the language and the phrases of the King James Bible were. I say that, because although the first Bible I was ever given was a King James Version, and it's still a treasured possession, I've not used that translation regularly for very many years. I'm not of the generation which had to learn passages of Scripture by heart, and so I was interested to find that I recognised so many of the words and phrases. And perhaps if you heard the programmes you felt the same.

Let me contrast that familiarity with a story told by a speaker at our District Synod a couple of years ago. She recounted an experience of a teacher friend, who'd taken a class of teenage girls on a field trip. Before they went, the teacher warned the students that they were going to be spending a day in the country, and that they needed to take waterproof

clothes and good sensible shoes. Unfortunately these girls were all fashion-conscious townies, and a fair proportion of them turned up in the sort of outfits that might have been great for an evening out clubbing in the city centre, but weren't much use for a day walking in the fields. Looking at the flimsy outfits and impractical high heels, the teacher turned to the class in exasperation and said to them: 'O you foolish virgins!' Now, you'll recognise that as an allusion to the story of the wise and foolish bridesmaids in Matthew 25. The girls though were really upset – "Miss, don't call us virgins!" - because they thought their street cred was being undermined in front of their friends. The biblical allusion went straight over their heads. We live among people for whom the Bible is a closed book. And so it's really important that we don't just celebrate the birthday of the King James Version this year, but make the most of this opportunity to encourage and help people to engage with the Bible in language they understand. In its translation work the Bible Society uses the phrase 'heart language' to describe the language of peoples' deepest feelings. Part of our task is to communicate the message of the Bible in the language that really speaks to people today, so that they can hear God's living word to them and be transformed by that encounter.

All kinds of obstacles can get between the reader and the Word of God in the Bible. There are so many translations around today, so which one should we choose? Where do we start reading? And how do we make sense of what we read? For most people, a straightforward translation in today's English is best – the Good News Bible, or the Common English Version, or the New International Version or the New Revised Standard Version, for instance. And do choose a translation, and not a paraphrase. Don't start at the beginning: if you do, you'll soon get bogged down in some very technical stuff in Leviticus and Numbers. Start with a gospel, perhaps – Mark's the shortest. Use a reading plan or some notes to guide you. Ask your minister for suggestions. And there'll probably be someone in your church who orders reading notes and who would be really pleased to make a recommendation for you. Think about the Disciple Bible Study course which we're planning to run in the circuit later this year. That's a great opportunity to read about 70% of the Bible over the year, and to share your discoveries in a group. Jonathan can tell you more about that.

Besides all those practical difficulties with the Bible, there are other problems too. The world of the Bible is a very different world from ours. Sometimes we think about how things have changed just in our own lifetime – remember the days when a computer filled a small warehouse and a mobile phone needed a trolley to move it around? We seem light years away from the world of our parents and grandparents, so how much bigger must be the gulf separating us from the world of the Bible, two thousand years ago and more! How on earth do we make connections between this ancient text and the concerns, needs and preoccupations of people today? And then, there's stuff in the Bible which is very hard for us to understand and to accept, not because it is technical or complicated, but because it grates on all our sensibilities: harsh laws, bloodthirsty stories, men (and some women) whose behaviour is pretty appalling. One Bible scholar has written about 'texts of terror' – passages which really disturb us and make us wonder what they are doing in a holy book. Is Scripture transformative, or toxic?

There are a couple of things we do well to remember. One is that we read the Bible, or hear it read, from a particular context and perspective. In other words, we bring to our engagement with Scripture a whole set of values and assumptions which for us are absolutely normal and as natural as breathing. And in reading a text from another culture, we need to recognise that, and allow for it. One contributor to the BibleFresh book produced for this year brings this out by inviting us to consider a gospel passage as we hear it today and as our Anglo-Saxon ancestors might have heard it. In Mark 13 and 14 Jesus speaks about tribulation and suffering, and about the coming of the Son of Man with divine authority to judge the world. At the end of chapter 14 we read about Simon Peter denying Jesus, but later on Peter is forgiven and restored. We may be very uncomfortable with the idea of judgement, but reassured that the disciples were fallible human beings like us, and that forgiveness and a new start are possible. The Anglo-Saxons, it is suggested, took judgement in their stride, but would have been really offended that someone who betrayed his Lord could possibly be held up as an example. Mixed in with all of that is the question of whether we stand over the Bible and judge it,

or whether we allow the Bible to challenge and subvert things we just take for granted. And that's a really big question about authority, and where authority rests.

The other thing we do well to remember is that the Bible isn't just one book. It's a library of books, collected, shaped and written down over two thousand years, and reflecting a whole range of styles, circumstances and types of literature. We know from our own everyday experience, don't we, that we approach different written material in different ways. I really like cooking, when time allows, but I don't see myself as a creative or instinctive cook, so I rely heavily on recipes. And I read them carefully, and I stick to them closely. I don't make it up as I go along, or miss bits out. But if I'm flicking through a magazine with the TV on in the background, I'm far less careful to read every word. I bring a different approach to reading a personal letter to the one I apply if I'm reading a novel. If I'm doing a piece of research, I make notes and look out for the salient points that I need to remember, but if someone gives me a financial report or a balance sheet to read, I have to get a cup of strong coffee and wrap a cold towel round my head to stay awake! Different types of writing call for different methods of reading, and if we apply the wrong method, we can get ourselves into difficulties.

Over the next five weeks we're going to be looking at some of the different sorts of material we find in the Bible: songs of praise, prophecy, letters, laments and laws. Not an exhaustive list, but enough for us to be going on with! We've taken this from the hymn we used earlier, and we hope that this will help us all to grow in understanding and appreciation of the amazing library which we find in Scripture, and to read the different sorts of material in the most appropriate and helpful ways. In launching the series tonight, as well as offering an introduction, I also wanted to speak very briefly about a sixth strand, which you'll have spotted in the hymn, and that's the theme of story. Three or four quick points on that.

It's almost too obvious to say that the Bible is full of stories. We know that, don't we! The best known stories, I guess, to us are in the gospels – the stories about Jesus and the stories Jesus told. But there are brilliant stories elsewhere in Scripture, particularly in the

Old Testament, in the Hebrew Bible. They are brilliant because they are wonderfully told, told with pace and verve and tremendous narrative skill, told too with wonderful economy of words, as you notice if a preacher takes twenty minutes to re-tell a story which the Bible put across in a couple of paragraphs! We can readily see how these stories were told and re-told over many years before someone wrote them down. In a world where few people could read but many could remember, and where the story-teller was the custodian of the community's memory, the shape and the form of a story mattered hugely. These stories have been crafted and polished, so that people could pass them on down the generations. So they are great stories! And the stories in Scripture are brilliant as well because they are true to life. They cross the centuries from the world of the Ancient Near East to the world of the internet and the mobile phone because they address what it means to be human, how we live together in families and communities, how we relate to one another, how we handle and understand the drives and impulses which well up from within ourselves, how we make sense of the world, and how we apprehend the reality we call God. I thank God for old-fashioned Sunday school teachers who told us Bible stories, and who gave us the narrative tools to interpret our experience of life through of wisdom of Ancient Israel. And I deeply deplore the neglect of the Hebrew Bible in much of our teaching and preaching today. But let's rein in the hobby horse at that point!

We all like a good story. And those of us who preach may sense congregations perking up and paying attention when we tell a story – and often that's the part of the sermon people remember and comment on afterwards. But some may feel uncomfortable talking about stories in the Bible, because they may sense the word 'only' lurking there somewhere: 'it's only a story'. When does illustration become fabrication, embellishment become inaccuracy, or truth dissolve into myth? And myth is a much sharper word than story, isn't it? Somehow it sounds different if we talk about the early chapters of Genesis, for instance, as 'myths' rather than 'stories'. But isn't that because we mistakenly assume that a myth isn't true? Better, and more accurate, to recognise that a myth or a story conveys truth, but not in the manner of a police witness statement or an engineering manual. We're not totally off the hook, because the Bible contains once-upon-a-time

stories, like the book of Job, and accounts which claim to be historically accurate, like Luke's Gospel, and stuff in between, like the stories of the kings, and Christians disagree about the amount of absolute accuracy and the degree of editing which has gone on. But we do have some room for manoeuvre!

The thread that guides me through all this is the verse in 2 Timothy which says 'from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.' God gives us his Word so that we may come to faith in Christ, and receive his gift of salvation. Arguments about the authority and inspiration of Scripture, and about the interpretation of particular passages, may rage, and we may want to get involved in them, but we mustn't lose sight of the purpose behind the Book. There is, if you like, a Big Story, an over-arching story, running through all the separate stories of Scripture. Now, I know that people are properly cautious about squashing all the disparate material in the Bible into one pattern. It's like making a spaghetti sandwich – as you push spaghetti in at one end of the sandwich, more drops out at the other end. However, I still believe that there is a grand narrative in Scripture, and that it is the story of salvation. That's the Big Story which helps us to understand all the rest.

All our Local Preachers will have at their bedsides John Wesley's *Forty-Four Sermons*, and in the preface Wesley says this about the Bible: 'I have thought, "I want to know one thing – the way to heaven ... God Himself has condescended to teach the way ... He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God!"' When we hear and respond to the message of salvation, the Big Story connects with our story. That which is universally and generally true becomes true for us, specifically and personally. The Bible finds us; it comes to life for us, in its understanding of the human condition, its depiction of our need, its message of grace and its gospel of God's transforming love. The Bible comes to life for us, and it brings life to us as we respond to God in Jesus Christ and claim the salvation he offers. And we see then how our story is woven into the story of God's redeeming purpose for his creation.

Please pray for all who will be preaching and leading worship over the next five weeks, and for our congregations. And as we explore praise and prophecy, letters, laws and laments, listen out for God's Big Story, and for your place within it. Amen.