

St Peter's Church Bournemouth
Sunday 28th October 2012
Bible Sunday

Sermon by Captain Philip Johanson CA: OBE, Church Army
Isaiah 55 v.1-11: 11 Timothy 3 v.14- 4 v.5: John 5 v.36-47

The Sunday school teacher in a certain town was taking the children from the Church Hall over to the church so that they could sing to the congregation a new song they had been learning. On their way to the church the teacher asked the children why it was important to be quiet in church. One bright little girl replied 'Because people are sleeping'. I trust that is not true this morning!

That little girl reminds me of another girl in very different circumstances.

Mary Jones as her name might suggest was born in Wales over 200 years ago. She came from a comparatively poor family. Her father was a weaver and both her parents were devout Methodists. They lived in a place called Cader Idris in what is known today as Gwynedd. It lies at the southern end of the Snowdonia National Park.

Mary was at church every week and loved learning all the Bible stories. Unfortunately at that time there were very few Bibles available. The nearest copy was in a village two miles from her home. Mary used to walk there to read it. She longed to have her very own Bible so that she might read it at home. She decided to save up so that she could buy her very own Bible. It took her six years to save the money needed, and at the age of 15 she had sufficient money to buy a Bible.

Mary heard that the Revd Thomas Charles in the market town of Bala, which was 25 miles from where Mary lived, had copies for sale. She set off barefoot as was usual to walk the 25 miles so that she could purchase her very own Bible. On arriving at Mr Charles home, Mary discovered that all the Bibles he had were already ordered. She was so distressed. Mr Charles was so impressed with Mary and her determination to have her own Bible that he sold her one of the Bibles that had originally been ordered by another person.

So impressed was Mr Charles that he suggested to the Religious Tract Society at that time, that they establish a Society in Wales to supply Bibles. That was the beginning of what is known today as The Bible Society. Today there are more than 140 Bible Societies around the world, translating, printing and distributing Bibles in many different languages.

So today on Bible Sunday: We give thanks for the determination of Mary Jones, for her commitment to have her own Bible. We also give thanks for the vision of the Revd Thomas Charles in helping to establish the Bible Society which has enabled countless thousands of people to have a copy of the Bible in their own language.

People often say that the Bible is the world's bestselling book. On occasions I want to add 'and the world's least read book'. Sadly in the west that is often true; however it is a different story in the developing world as I have discovered over the years on my many travels around the world. I have come across clergy who do not even have their own copy of the Bible – they long for a copy for themselves.

How many copies of the Bible do you have at home? I am almost embarrassed to say that I counted at least 20 copies at home last week – several I have bought – different translations – and several I have had given.

The one I am using today is very special. On the inside cover are the words:

'Presented to Lord Coggan: Publication of the Revised English Bible in South Africa – 15th February 1990 – Lord Coggan, the former Archbishop of Canterbury gave this Bible to me when I became Chief Secretary of Church Army. It is special to me because of who gave it to me and when; however it is the same Bible as any other you or I might have.

Perhaps the more important question than how many Bible's do you have – is how often do you read the Bible? Although for some people the question is – why read the Bible anyway? I think the readings today especially the Epistle might help to answer that question.

1. The Bible provides a foundation for life

In today's Epistle Paul is writing to Timothy and he is encouraging him to read the Bible – or the Old Testament as he would have had it – and to live by it.

Earlier in 11 Timothy – in Chapter 3 he tells Timothy of things that will come to pass. He writes: 'But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control' – and so the list goes on. 11 Timothy 3 v.1

Listening to those words it could almost be a snapshot of today. That is the context in which Paul writes to Timothy those words in our Epistle today. 'But as for you' – whatever might be the situation, whatever others might think, say or do. 'But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.' Verse 14

So Paul says to Timothy you can trust the Bible because you trust those who taught it to you. 'You know from whom you have learned it.'

Yes Paul was one of the people who taught Timothy. However we read in chapter 1 that Paul writes about Timothy's faith with these words: 'I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and I am persuaded, now lives in you also' 11 Timothy 1 v.5

So Paul reminds Timothy that his faith which was shared by his mother and his grandmother has provided a foundation for his life. It was a family experience – they shared it together.

Paul says whatever happens in the world, live by what you learn in the Bible and that will keep you on the right track in life.

The Bible provides a foundation for life. I have discovered that to be true time and time again. I have also come across people whose lives have been radically changed through reading the Bible and putting into practice what they were reading and learning. The Bible provides a foundation for life.

2. The Bible provides signposts in life

On a journey especially to an unknown destination a map is a useful thing to have or if you are modern a Satnav in the car. Signposts on the road can also be helpful. Likewise if you are walking in a strange place, in a town or in the country, a signpost can be useful. On occasions they give you options – the long route or the short one. The route to avoid low bridges and so on.

In a town centre there might be options – such as getting to the beach from here. You could walk down Westover Road or you could walk down Hinton Road. Both routes will get you there.

So in life we need signposts to help us along the way. Without signposts in life we can so easily lack a sense of direction. The results can be devastating.

People, who find themselves caught up with drugs, drink and so on – it is often a lack of good signposts in life that has led them in that direction. Then there are people who feel their life is falling apart – they are in a state of turmoil – needing a signpost amidst all the chaos.

The Bible teaches us the way in which God intends life to be lived.

Paul writes to Timothy that the Bible will provide for him signposts in life – the way his life should be lived. Paul writes: 'All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man (or woman) of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.' 11 Timothy 3 v.16-17

The Bible provides signposts for living. Obviously it does not spell out details although on occasions it might. The Bible does not for example tell us which job we should apply for or which pension fund to sign up to. There are many things in life today

that were not around, or where not issues, in the days in which the Bible was written. The signposts which the Bible gives are often related to general principles. For instance the Bible speaks about relationships and the way in which we should treat and respect other people. The Bible has a fair amount to say about living life and a certain amount about eternal life.

If we are to be informed intelligent followers of Christ then the Bible needs to be our guide providing our signposts in life.

Many people believe that God speaks through the Bible – providing signposts for living – and that is true. However you need to take care as to how you understand that. You may have heard of the person who had been told to read the Bible because God speaks to you through it. He took the Bible and opened it to see what God was saying. As he opened it he looked down and his eyes fixed on: Matthew 27 v.5 – ‘Judas went away and hanged himself’

Well thought the man I am sure God is not saying that to me. So he closed the Bible and opened it on a new page and his eyes were on Luke 10 v.37 which reads: ‘Jesus told him: Go and do likewise’ By this time the man was becoming unsure about God speaking through the Bible but he thought I will have one more attempt. He closed the Bible, opened it and his eyes were on John 13 v.27 which reads: ‘Jesus said – What you are about to do, do quickly.’

There is a danger in opening the Bible at random and expecting God to speak.

The Bible needs to be read in context and verses need to be seen within the context in which they are written. That is why I gave the context of our Epistle today.

Bible Reading notes are published to help us understand what we are reading. They suggest reading a few verses a day and then the notes provide a comment on those verses. New Daylight published by the Bible Reading Fellowship covers material for four months at a cost of £4 – £1 per month.

Reading the Bible often shows something new. We also discover what was actually said and done rather than what we thought was said and done.

The Bible provides a foundation for life. The Bible provides signposts in life.

3. The Bible provides illustrations of life

If the Bible provides both a foundation for life and signposts in life we might expect it to show us some illustrations of life. You see the Bible is not a book about theory – it is about practice. For example that well known story we call the Good Samaritan. It is all about relationships and the outworking of them. As you know the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans. So when Jesus is talking to Jewish people he uses as his example of a caring person – a Samaritan.

You see life brings it surprises and its challenges and the Bible is full of them. That is what today's Gospel reading is all about. Jesus was being persecuted again by a group of Jewish people. They did not like the fact that he had healed a lame man on the Sabbath Day. They were furious that he claimed to be the Son of God.

Jesus says to them: 'I do not accept the praise of men, but I know you. I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts.
John 5 v. 41

Jesus says you might keep all the rules but you do not have real love in your hearts. The Bible is full of teaching about the way we should live our lives.

On Bible Sunday we give thanks for the Bible. We give thanks for Mary Jones and her determination to have her own Bible. We give thanks for the vision of the Revd Thomas Charles. In so doing let us be determined to read the Bible and understand it and live by it. We do this because we know that the Bible provides a foundation for life, it provides signposts in life, and it provides illustrations of life for us to follow.