

Mt 24:30-35, Colossians 3:12-17

25th October 2014 - Bible Sunday

St. Andrew's Totteridge - 8:00 & 10:00 a.m.

Gracious God, grant that through love for your written Word, and in the truth of this spoken Word, we may encounter the Living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

You need a Bible to hold!

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

What enormities are comprised in these words. I struggle to imagine the totality of the earth in all its complexity, let alone the mysterious dimension that is the kingdom of heaven. But Jesus says that both these, in all their complexity, are not infinite – they will one day pass away. The only thing that will always be, is the word of God. Today we celebrate Bible Sunday, and give thanks for the scriptures passed down to us across the ages.

In his enthronement sermon my previous Bishop, the Bishop of Salisbury Nicholas Holtham, talked of some of the ways that we may see Jesus. In making a point about how God is accepting of everyone, he said,

the Gospels emphasize that Christ is present where 2 or 3 are gathered together in his name, that we do not follow just singly but in the company of others, a community of the resurrection. Together we see God in one Jesus, through four Gospels, with twelve disciples, and sixty-six books of the Bible: pluralism is built into the script. We would be a happier and more confident Church if we could accept and enjoy these differences and celebrate the rich variety of what we see in Jesus between us.

What we know of Jesus is almost entirely contained in this book, these hundreds of pages, these 1,189 chapters, 7,956 verses, and 138,020 words. (indebted to Canon Tim Biles for much of the following information...). Here's some more Bible trivia, or you may think of it as significance:

- the middle chapter of the Bible is Psalm 118.
- Ps.117 is the shortest chapter in the bible and Ps.119 is the longest.
- There are 594 chapters before Ps.118 and 594 after Ps.118.
- If you add up all the chapters except Ps.118, you get a total of 1188 chapters.
- 1188 or Ps.118, v.8, is the middle verse of the entire Bible. What does it say? “It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in mortals.”

I'd say this was a fairly central theme of the Bible wouldn't you – quite a good choice to have centre-stage.

Ps.118 is one of the books of the O.T., but when the 39 books of the O.T. end, *God is still not known*. The O.T. is the story of a search, not a discovery. But the O.T. sets the stage, a turbulent bloodstained stage, for the entry of The Word - The Word made flesh, The Word who will fulfil and complete the search. It's the 27 books of the New Testament that reveal the discovery

So there are three observations to share with you about the Bible. The first is that the Bible is a library, not a book. It's 66 books, 1189 chapters spanning thousands of years. There are years of conflict: wars and massacres, exile and return, bloodshed and tyranny, with some proverbs, psalms, poetry and politics thrown in.

There are years of religious exploration: law-giving and law-breaking, slaughter in the name of God to claim the Promised Land, ethnic cleansing by the warrior kings to retain it, the rise of prophets with flashes of insight into the ways of God as they appeal for justice and mercy before they also suffer their own violent fates.

Horror, heroism and holiness, all mixed together in the search for the divine. It's gripping stuff! It's so sad that some people think it dull.

The second observation about the Scriptures is this, that they come from the East, the edge of the Orient, the lands of mystery. They come from the Eastern oral culture of *storytelling*. They introduce Jesus the storyteller par excellence, *'who never taught them without a parable.'* The stories of the East are often set in riddles. They are enigmatic not dogmatic.

An Eastern mystic was once asked by his puzzled disciples: *'Master, explain your stories so that we can understand.'* The mystic replied, *'What would you say if I offered you a beautiful bowl of fruit after I had chewed it myself?'* And didn't Jesus end his stories with *'Anyone with ears to hear, listen.'* Either way, it is the listener who has to puzzle it out.

So the Bible is not a book of solutions, not a collection of proof-texts - though with 1189 chapters to choose from it would be possible to prove almost anything: that the earth is flat, that the sun can be stopped, that a donkey can talk. To use the Bible for selective proof-texts is to turn Divine enigmas into man-made dogmas. The Bible is not an answer book, it is a puzzle book. It doesn't close debate; it opens it - which is why we often see Jesus debating the meaning of Scriptures in the Gospel.

The third observation, and the key question: what sort of truth does the Bible hold? Those great stories: of Adam and Eve in the Garden, with the apple and the snake; of Moses at the Red Sea with the waters parting for the Israelites, but drowning the Egyptians; of Daniel in the lions' den, coming out smiling; of Jonah swallowed by the whale and coming out stronger three days later; of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego surviving the Burning Fiery Furnace. Are these and all the other stories fact or fiction, history or science, or what?

I believe we do better to read the Bible symbolically, to believe that the truths of the Bible are *implicit* not *explicit*; *literary* not *literal*; *enigmatic* not *dogmatic*. In short, there is more mystery than history. Like gold, the truths must be dug out, and sifted. The

Biblical writers, in the style of the East, find hints of the divine in all life, in history, in visions, in dreams, in hymnody, in fact and in fiction. The Biblical books, like Jesus' parables, have meanings and truths deeper than mere facts. *'The Bible'*, says one of our scholars, *'is full of sublime poetry, which sometimes lapses into mere facts.'*

To finish then, the three thoughts to leave with you: the Bible as a varied library; the Bible as an Eastern product; the Biblical truths to be mined like gold. But we must be circumspect about our celebration today; I'll end with a story because that's the style of the Bible:

Two children were playing on the sands. One was running to the sea and filling his bucket with water, then running back to pour it in the hole. The other one was digging.

Two Bible scholars were walking by, and they stopped to watch the children at play. Eventually one said to the children: *'What do you think you're doing, rushing down to the sea with that little bucket, and pouring the water in the hole?'*

'Ssshhh !' said the children. *'We're in a hurry. We're trying to put the sea in the hole'* and they carried on, running to and fro.

The two scholars walked on, and one said to the other: *'Silly children! Fancy thinking they can fit the great big ocean into that little hole!'*

'Just like us,' said the other, *'thinking we can put God into words'*

Spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Mt 24:30-35

³⁰Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see “the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven” with power and great glory. ³¹And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

³² ‘From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ³³So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁴Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³⁵Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

Nehemiah 8.1-4a, 8-12

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¹all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel.

²Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. ³He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. ⁴The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishaël, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand.

⁸So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

⁹ And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, ‘This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.’ For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. ¹⁰Then he said to them, ‘Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.’ ¹¹So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, ‘Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.’ ¹²And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

Colossians 3:12-17

¹² As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. ¹⁷And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

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