

## **SERMON ST PHILIP'S – SUNDAY 23 OCTOBER 2016**

### **Rupert Steele**

Today's sermon is a sandwich; touching on the Gospel reading at start and end, with the meat in the middle being a discussion of the Bible.

The Gospel is Luke's account of the start of Jesus' ministry. The synagogue of the time did not have an ordained minister and anybody of sufficient learning might be invited by the board of elders to take part in the services. There was however an attendant who combined the functions of steward, altar server and school teacher. The Sabbath service included a free reading from the prophets after which a sermon was delivered from a sitting position. So when Jesus was invited to preach he was able to choose the reading from Isaiah and on returning it to the attendant, preach his sermon.

Jesus' sermon was based on the Old Testament Bible, but as always with a twist. He took one of the prophecies of the coming of the Messiah and essentially said "that's me". Imagine if I said that. You'd all say that Rupert had finally lost it. Or maybe "there he goes again", depending on whether you think I lost it years ago. Well that's more or less the reaction Jesus got – our reading includes the bit about the people listening intently but stops short of the bit where the people run him out of town as a blasphemer. So there's a risk when reading the Bible – selective reading can cause you to miss the context.

So what is the Bible? We recite that it is the word of the Lord – indeed the reader says that after the first lesson in our service. But it's a lot more complicated than that. For one thing, it isn't really a book at all but a collection of books of radically different character.

The Latin for "library" is bibliotheca and the same carries into French – bibliothèque. So that's where the name comes from. But it's more than etymology, for the Bible can best be seen as a library of faith.

You probably wouldn't want to read a library by taking the books in the order they were on the shelf. If you did, and it was arranged according to the Dewey Decimal system, you would start with Computer science, then turn to Philosophy & psychology, Religion, Social sciences, Language, Science, Technology, Arts & recreation, Literature and finally History & geography. You might not get far without getting a headache, and not everybody will want to read the Bible from cover to cover.

The Bible contains many different types of content. There are narratives, telling the great stories of the Old and New Testaments, hymnody – the Psalms were an ancient hymn book, theology as in Paul's letters or Job, wisdom teaching as in Proverbs, and yes, prophetic teaching.

A common thread is that most of the material is about God and our relationship with him. It's like the Bible shows us a view of God, and how we should relate to him, from many different angles.

If you look at a three dimensional object – and God may have many more dimensions than three – from different angles, it can look quite different. You need to abstract from the particular view to envision the overall object for it to make sense. It isn't the profile from a particular angle that counts but the nature of the underlying object.

So the critical thing about reading the Bible is that scripture must be read as a whole. It's not just about avoiding cutting off the story prematurely, as our Gospel today suggests a more positive reception for Jesus' words than the full account reveals. It's about wider context. A particular passage – which could be a difficult one – must be read within the context of the overall love of God revealed through the incarnation, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus.

So when we find particular verses which are negative about women or gay people, we need to test them against the overall pattern of God's love revealed by scripture as a whole. We may conclude that they are not a reflection of God's word, but a reflection of attitudes of the time. Surely, scripture is not a set of final answers to all life's problems based on life two thousand years ago. Why would God's mind be stuck at a particular point in time? Indeed, even by the time of Jesus, the Jews had understood that the books of the law were not to be interpreted literally and had developed traditions and structures to adapt them to their needs.

Of course, we should be careful about discarding text from the Bible simply because it grates to modern ears. There may be another, different truth behind the words that is not obvious on their difficult surface. And it is of course possible that modern views may themselves evolve or be mistaken.

Church services and Bible study groups provide an ideal opportunity for people to meet, have fellowship, pray together and share perspectives on what this wonderful book is telling us. That's a great thing to do whether we are looking at a difficult passage or one of the great inspirational texts. Who can fail to have their spirits lifted by Isaiah's prophecy "unto us a Son is given", the prologue to John's Gospel, the sermon on the mount, or St Paul's hymn to love in 1 Corinthians 13? But each of us may see new and additional ways to squeeze new joy out of those texts and many others and it's great to share these perspectives. Just as the Bible teaches us about the love of God from many different angles, so we can gain insight from looking at passages in the Bible from many different angles.

The Collect for today encapsulates this thinking in words that are famous and familiar. "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".

Let's return to the Synagogue to complete my sandwich. Jesus takes an old prophecy of the coming of the Messiah and breathes new life into it. And it's not just his claim to be the Messiah. As we read Luke's account we can think about Isaiah's words and a quite different interpretation of them.

Jesus says he will bring good news to the poor. God has sent him to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

It's not necessarily about ending poverty, emptying prisons, eye treatment, releasing slaves and proclaiming a year of jubilee where debts are cancelled. Knowing the whole Gospel, we may think this was more about the promise of God's love and mercy, bringing the comfort of the Gospel to the spiritually poor and to those held captive by sin. Opening the eyes of those who were blind to the truth of God's love or oppressed by guilt. Proclaiming the good news of God's love, resurrection and victory over death and sin.

Jesus read, marked, learnt and inwardly digested the word of God and found a deeper truth revealed in today's Gospel. Let us follow him as we read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the Bible, and do the same.

Amen