

Readings for Bible Sunday

23rd October 2022

First Reading: Isaiah 45:22-25

Thus says the Lord:

Turn to me and be saved,
all the ends of the earth!

For I am God, and there is no other.

By myself I have sworn;
from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness
a word that shall not return:

“To me every knee shall bow,
every tongue shall swear.”

Only in the LORD, it shall be said of me,
are righteousness and strength;
all who were incensed against him
shall come to him and be ashamed.

In the LORD all the offspring of Israel
shall triumph and glory.

Second Reading: Romans 15:1-6

We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbour for the good purpose of building up the neighbour. For Christ did not please himself, but, as it is written, “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.” For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Gospel: St Luke 4:16-24

When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,

to set free those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is this not Joseph's son?" He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.' " And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in his hometown.

A Reflection for Bible Sunday

I wonder if you have come across the term 'Fresh Expressions' in connection with church. Fresh Expressions are defined as 'new forms of church that emerge within contemporary culture and engage primarily with those who don't 'go to church'. So something a bit different.

When I was in Inverness, I was briefly involved with one such 'Fresh Expression': Messy Church – unfortunately Covid got in the way and, by the time things were more relaxed, I had moved here to the North-West Charge. I know that some of you are familiar with Messy Church and others of you may well have heard of it. It is a national initiative with many Messy Churches in different places.

Briefly, at Messy Church, participants choose from a variety of activities around the theme of the meeting, some of which may, indeed, be messy. There is also time for stories, worship and prayer, and the meeting ends with a shared meal of some sort. It attracts mainly families with young children, most of whom have no other church connection – it is their church.

Messy Church is not intended as a stepping-stone to 'proper' church (whatever we think that is). It is a different way of being church, a Christian community coming together to worship God and learn about faith. It may look different to an average service in our congregations, but at its heart is a Bible story, a shared meal and worship – elements that are perhaps not so different.

We are keeping today as Bible Sunday. Bible Sunday is promoted by The Bible Society, and marked by churches of many denominations and different expressions of church, as a day when we celebrate the gift of God's word in Scripture, the written word of God. As St Paul says in the passage we heard from Romans:

Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope.

The Old Testament tells us of the story of God and God's people in the books of the Law, history, wisdom and prophecy. When one reads through the Old Testament, the thing that always strikes me is how often the people fell away from their covenant relationship with God – it says 'they did evil in the sight of the Lord' over and over again. And yet, God continued to love them, repeatedly giving them another chance and promising that he would send the Messiah, a redeemer who would reconcile them to God.

The New Testament tells us of the coming of that Messiah in the person of Jesus, God's only Son, the revelation of God in human form. We have the eye-witness accounts of his life, death and resurrection in the Gospels, and the various letters from the early church as they struggled to make sense of what this all meant.

'Whatever was written ... was written for our instruction' said Paul. But there are some parts of the Bible that are very difficult, and some that seem appalling. With such a wide variety of types of writing, written over a period of more than 1000 years, we need to be careful how we interpret them.

It seems that interpretation or exposition of the Scriptures has always been necessary. In Jesus time, as far as we know, normal practice in the synagogue on the Sabbath was the reading and exposition of Scripture, and Jesus was clearly a regular attendee and reader - in the passage we heard from Luke's Gospel, we are told it was his custom. It is probable that some form of liturgical calendar of readings from Scripture was used, so Jesus was handed the scroll and read these prophetic verses about God's Messiah from Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to bring 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.

They are actually an amalgamation of most of verses 1&2 of chapter 61 of Isaiah with a verse from chapter 58. For Jesus' audience in the synagogue that day, they would have evoked long-cherished hopes of God's salvation, and there must have been a huge sense of expectation about what the subsequent exposition and discussion would bring. As we are told 'the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.'

Jesus sat down after the reading, as would a rabbi about to start teaching, and made a momentous declaration: 'Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' He is the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy, the Messiah. He is the one who will bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and so on. That fulfilment of Scripture is rooted in the person of Jesus: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, ... he has anointed me, ...he has sent me ...

And the person of Jesus is also the Word of God. Remember the familiar words from the start of St John's Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us...

So the written word of God in Scripture is fulfilled in the incarnate Word of God, Jesus.

Unfortunately, his listeners in the synagogue didn't 'see', they didn't get the significance of what he was saying. Initially, it seems to have almost completely passed them by. We can imagine the scene: 'What a nice boy.' 'Isn't he clever?' 'I know his parents.' In the Gospel passage we have today, we don't get the end of the story. As Jesus continued his increasingly challenging exposition, and some of what he was claiming started to get through, the atmosphere changed and he was driven from the town.

Those at Nazareth had the advantage of first-hand experience of Jesus and yet failed to understand the Scriptures. We may well ask, if they couldn't understand, what hope is there for us in understanding and interpreting them? I think there are two important reasons for hope.

Firstly, we too have first-hand experience of Jesus' presence with us through his Holy Spirit, enabling our understanding. Secondly, we have the benefit of hindsight. We have the advantage of seeing the whole picture, the whole story of Jesus' life and ministry, his death and resurrection.

Paul said:

Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope.

At the heart of our worship, whether in a traditional service or in a Fresh Expression such as Messy Church, is God's Word, both in the Bible and in the person of Jesus and his presence with us. For both those things we have good reason for hope and to celebrate on this Bible Sunday.