

## Readings for Bible Sunday

3<sup>rd</sup> November 2024

### First Reading: Isaiah 55:1-11

Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.

See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

### Second Reading: 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

### Gospel: St John 5:36-47

Jesus said to the Jews: "I have a testimony greater than John's. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form, and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent."

“You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. I do not accept glory from human beings. But I know that you do not have the love of God in you. I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not accept me; if another comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God? Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?”

### **A Reflection for Bible Sunday**

*From Rev’d David Higgon*

The bible is a remarkable book or rather a remarkable collection of books. It is a superb story book, full of tales well told, but it is more than a collection of stories, there is one big story told by this collection of individual stories. At the centre of this one big story is God and God’s relationship with humanity and the whole of creation. Within the Old Testament are stories about the history of Israel, there is beautiful poetry and there are the words of numerous prophets and their prophesies, who tell of all the good things God will do for his people, and how God would rescue the people from their oppressors. At the heart of this big story is a story of God’s love for the world that is reveals to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus tells the people that God is still in charge despite their oppression, and he tells them stories of what God’s kingdom is all about and that it is close at hand. The New Testament tells of his birth and incarnation as God on earth, his ministry and his teachings, the story of his death on the cross and the amazing story of his resurrection, of how he rose from the dead after three days when his followers were overjoyed to see him alive again, death had not been able to defeat him. He was the same Jesus they had known for three years, but somehow more alive than before. He was the Messiah, the saviour that the prophets of old had spoken about.

The bible is the bestselling book of all time, with an estimated five billion copies sold. It has been translated into over seven hundred languages. I have several copies of it in English, Welsh, Scots Gaelic and in Kasi, a tribal language of Northeast India.

Christianity has been around these shores since the time of the Romans, so it’s hard to believe that there have been times when the church and governments restricted access to the bible to authorised clergy only. The people, the laity, had to rely on the clergy to read and interpret the bible for them. Not until the 16<sup>th</sup> century were there English, Gaelic Irish and Welsh translations, and we had to wait until 1801 for there to be a full Scots Gaelic version of the bible. Why? Well, there are many reasons for this but one certainly was because the Bible was considered to be a dangerous book, that in the wrong hands it could be used to incite rebellion against kings and civil authorities. As late as the 1980’s in Guatemala the singing of Mary’s song, the Magnificat was banned in public worship because it was seen as subversive. In it Mary proclaims that God will bring down the mighty and raise up the lowly and feed the hungry.

There is no doubt that this wonderful book, the Bible , has been used to justify the most vile things imaginable, such as the buying and selling of human beings kidnapped into slavery; it has been used, and is still used, to

suppress women and to deny women equal rights with men; it has been used to justify the persecution of Jews, to justify the colonisation and the oppression of indigenous people, and to uphold the dominance of white people over black people in apartheid South Africa. It is used today to justify anti-gay legislation, to deny the rights of gay people, to justify the death penalty and as a justification for the domination and abuse of God's creation.

In the light of this, you may think that there is a good case for controlling the interpretation of scripture, that is until you realise that, in the main, the perpetrators of these abuses, and their justification of them through the misuse of God's Word, were and still are in some cases, not only civil authorities but also their churches and clergy.

How does this abuse occur? Well as I said the bible is a big collection of stories that make up the one big story of God and his love for creation, and of Jesus Christ and the hope we have in him for the world. However, if you ignore the big story and selectively dip into the individual stories of the bible, then you can justify almost anything. One of the mistakes university students often make, is to scan a textbook for a suitable quotation to include in an essay, without reading what is written before and after the sentence they have quoted. This is to ignore the context of the quotation, and it is done to give the impression that you are more knowledgeable than what you actually are. Jesus spoke of this misuse when, in today's reading he said, *"You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life."* Some people scan the scriptures to justify their actions or their ideology but fail to see the bigger picture.

Timothy tells us, *"All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work."* What he tells us is that scripture as the *inspired word of God*, equips us to do good works, not to justify the oppression of people, not to justify the abuse of God's creation, but to work for that which is good.

Those words *'the inspired word of God'* point to something quite fundamental; it literally means that scripture is God breathed, and the breath of God is understood as being the Holy Spirit. When we think about God, we should think in terms of the Holy Trinity, of God in three persons, Father, son and Holy Spirit. At the start of our service, we said a prayer together where we asked, *Almighty God to whom all hearts are open, and all desires know... [to] cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit so that we perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name.* This is a good prayer to pray before we begin reading the bible. It is to ask God to enable us to engage with scripture through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, so as to inspire our reading in a framework of love. In the medieval period there was a Scots theologian based in Paris, Richard of St Victor who died in 1173. He wrote that the Holy Spirit was the bond of love between Father and Son, and he compared the Trinity with a lover, the one loved, and love.

The Bible should be read within the context of a triune God of love and in the context of the big story of God's love for the whole of humanity and the whole of his creation. It should be read in a way that doesn't allow for the misuse of God's inspired word to justify the abuse of living things, or to oppress people on the basis of their gender race or beliefs, but to inspire us to work for that which is good, for justice peace and reconciliation.