

Bible Sunday 2019, 27th October

Romans 15:3-6

That by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope

All these things, says Paul, were written for your instruction, so that by steadfastness and the encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope.

There are days, don't you think, that threaten to knock the stuffing out of you – when pain and problems just seem everywhere and overwhelming. I had once recently, where in quick succession I was with people in the middle of the most horrendous family conflict, where the sheer and stupid cruelty of some was driving others to hatred, to despair, to self-harm. And then the phone rang, twice, and it was first about somebody else in a mental health crisis, with no food and a disintegrating life; and second to tell me someone else was rushed into hospital and on life support. And then I bumped into the man with a young family who hasn't enough money anyway, telling me cheerfully about how he was heading back to the betting shop *again*, because, Vicar, I came so close to winning last night.

All that in three quick hours and then home, to Brexit, and people frozen in the back of a lorry.

It is actually a wonder, if people open their eyes and actually look at the world, that more us are not sunk in depression and despair. That afternoon certainly came close to knocking the stuffing out of me.

And Paul says, whatever was written in former days -the Bible – was written for your encouragement. So you might have hope.

I think he's right. The Bible is my backbone, especially the Psalms, the Gospels, the Prophets. It's only because I read it day after day, that I read, mark, learn, inwardly digest it like the collect says, that life has not, yet, knocked the stuffing out of me.

The Bible tells me the story of it all: tells me that all our lives, however badly we mishandle them, are in the hands of a God who made us and loves us and who is determined, utterly determined, to bring us all to glory. That story embraces the family in crisis, the intensive care bed, the man falling apart, the stupid gambler, me, you. It's hope for every one of us.

And if that story wasn't scored deep and daily into my heart and soul and mind, it would be so easy to believe its opposite. To believe that all around us is futility, that it's all breaking down, that in the end life is pain and loss and death. The Bible tells us a different story. It feeds us with courage and makes us strong to face the day.

And that is why I am so delighted that we have got lots of new Bibles in church – and why I urge you, please, please, use them. Read, mark, learn, inwardly digest them, because in them is your comfort. In them is the word of life. Here is courage and strength waiting for you.

But maybe for you all that is blocked, because the Bible seems not so much a gift as a problem. Because you *have* read it a bit, and you know it is complicated. Worse than complicated – maybe even repellent.

What about those Old Testament stories of whole cities and tribes being put to the sword because God commands it – indeed on some occasions of Israel even being condemned because it doesn't slaughter quite enthusiastically enough?

Or think of that charming story of Noah, which bizarrely we love teaching children – yes, there are lots of cute animals and a boat, but it's also about God deciding to drown *everything*. Not just the murderers and the torturers, but the crippled, the old, the babies.

Can *these* things *really* be written for our encouragement?

So what do with those passages?

Well, the first thing is to be very clear about one of the dangers of Bible Sunday. And that is that it can encourage Bible worship, where every book, every sentence in the Bible is given the same weight as every other, where every word is considered God's Word. If something is clearly what the Bible says, people think, it must be what God says – so if the Bible says God commanded genocide, well then, He did.

You do not have to believe this to be a Christian. Look at the Creed we'll say in a few moments. That's what you have to believe. Now, much of it is hard enough, but you'll not find a word in there about genocide, nor about taking every claim in the Bible as being on the same level. Anyone who tells you that *proper* Christians, *real* Christians believe everything in the Bible does not know what they are talking about. There are indeed what you might call degrees of inspiration in the Bible. Some things are more God's Word than others, and some things are actually just *our* words. Our words about God, with all our usual mistakes built in.

At which point someone should say ah, well, how do you know which bit is God's Word, and which bit isn't? What gives you the ability to discern these things, o wise master of the universe? Presuming to judge the Bible is just arrogance. Our job is to trust and obey God's Word, not to debate it.

Which is not a wholly ridiculous thing to say. Indeed, we don't know everything, and sometimes we need to let the Bible challenge us and change us – even on things that we might hold very dear. However, just because it is not wholly ridiculous does not mean it is wholly right. Because actually, we *do* have some ability to discern what is of God, and what is not. The Bible is *not* the only way we know God, and we have at least two other lights to guide us.

First, we know God through our consciences. Muddled and blurred and weak as they may be, they were given to us (says the Bible, no less!) as a key way in which God speaks to us. And if something in the Bible – divinely ordered genocide, say – makes your conscience sick, that is a good sign that it is not of God. Perhaps not an infallible sign, and one that will still need much thought, prayer, study and argument before you act on it – but a good sign. People who let what the Bible says shut down their conscience are making a terrible mistake, because conscience is an even greater gift of God than the Bible.

And secondly, we know *what* the Word of God is because of *who* the Word of God is.

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We cannot say often enough: according to the Bible itself, the Bible is not the word of God. According to the Bible itself, the Bible is not the word of God. Jesus Christ is the Word of God, the one whom John's Gospel says belongs with God from the very beginning of things, and who was made flesh and dwelt among us, and was crucified and raised. If you want to know what God says, what God is like, - look at Jesus, says the Bible itself. And if you can imagine Jesus ordering genocide, well, good luck. But if you can't, then know that whenever the Bible says God did, it is wrong. Not misunderstood, not symbolic, not right in very exceptional circumstances – wrong.

Jesus is the Word of God. He is the one who has come out from God. He is the one who gathers up and seals what the whole long Biblical story with all its stops and starts and mistakes and sin and stupidity has been trying to say. He is the one who says it perfectly, who says it clearly, in whom human words and God's word come together and nothing gets lost. And what He says is this:

All the chaos, all the disintegration – all the cruelty and the despair and weakness and stupidity of human beings, the sin of the world in the old biblical phrase – all of it, is met and absorbed and loved by God. That's what the Cross means.

That's the climax of the whole Biblical story, why in John's Gospel Jesus cries out in the end: 'it is finished' – completed, consummated, done. God is planted in the deadliest pit of human darkness. The love and justice and mercy for which the prophets longed are shot into the darkest heart of it all, and there they begin their healing work. Everything that we thought was lost and broken – our best hopes, our dead, the damned – *everything* is held and enveloped by God: resurrection surges around them all and in them all. *Everything* is given hope. That's the Word of God. That's the story of the Bible. That's what struggles to be heard from Genesis 1, verse 1, and which finally, triumphantly speaks over all the human confusion and noise, speaks in Jesus.

That's what gives us courage.

That's *who* gives us courage.

To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.