

Bible Sunday 2018

Sometimes it is very tempting to recycle sermons. To say, 'here's one I made earlier.'

Like today for instance. Bible Sunday. I have a terrific Bible Sunday sermon on file from twelve years ago. It's got jokes, it's got great points, and it makes them in just the right way. I read it and think, was I good back then. That was Top-Gun preaching.

Unfortunately, the point of that sermon was all about making sure students didn't become fundamentalists. It was about encouraging them to read the Bible, yes, but to make sure they read it in the right way – in the context of the church, of tradition, of reason, of experience. Sometimes students, you see, could be tempted to Bible-worship: to treating the Bible as if it was God. So that's what the sermon warned against.

I don't think that's what you need to hear.

I may be wrong – I'm sure I am wrong in many individual cases – but I don't really get the impression that in *this* church, we give the Bible too much importance.

Not in our individual lives, not in our corporate life.

So, for instance, I can't remember anybody here telling me that they'd come across something in their daily Bible reading that they really didn't understand, and asking me what I thought of it?

And I certainly don't regularly ask people, when we're chatting, what book of the Bible they're reading and what they're making of it. In some churches, *that* would be an absolutely standard, predictable part of chatting with your vicar. Why not us?

And I can't remember anyone, in the various debates we had about christenings, for example, and whether we should say yes to everyone who asks without making many or any demands of them – I don't recall anyone – with the honourable exception of Brian Hibberd - saying that what we really needed to do was study what the Bible says.

No, I don't think this church's problem is that we take the Bible too seriously. Even if you are all actually reading it devotedly at home – and I *really* don't think most of you are – we're not talking about it. And we should be. We should be a community where at the very least, these texts play a big part in our debates, and our lives. Even if we're not quite sure what to make of them, even if we don't think they're the only, supreme, voice we should listen to – they should be important. And if they're not, something has really gone wrong in our religion.

Why?

The first and most boring reason is simply historical. Being a Christian means being part of a community that takes these books seriously. Christians worship, Christians celebrate the sacraments, Christians read the Bible – it's just one of our core things. The things without

which we are not ourselves. Being a Christian without the Bible being a big deal in your life is like making Star Wars without Darth Vader. I suppose you can do it, but it would be odd, diminished, weird. These books are at the centre of our faith.

And incidentally, that doesn't mean that a particular *theory* about them is. You don't have to believe, for instance, that every single word of the Bible is true. No Christian has ever been required to believe that. Indeed, you couldn't, because if you know your Bible well what you soon realise is that much of it is a great big argument with itself. Do the right thing, says the book of Deuteronomy, and things will go right. Life is basically fair, the system works. Oh no it doesn't, says the book of Job. God is dark and inscrutable. The righteous are always getting shafted and no-one knows why. Why worry, says the book of Ecclesiastes, everything is just mad and absurd. Have another drink. The Bible does not have one message: it's an argument. And classically, being Christian has meant becoming part of it.

The second reason knowing your Bible is really, really important is because it is a phenomenally good book. I don't mean every page of course. Even the holiest will find some of it hard going. But over and over again, the Bible has the right words, the best words, for so many human situations. It says what we need to say, it describes our experience perfectly before God. Are you filled with rage at how the powerful bully the power and the weak – you will never find wrath fiercer than in Psalm 58. Are you broken beside the dead body of a loved one? You will never find hope more beautiful than 1 Corinthians 15: where O grave is thy victory? Where O death is thy sting? Are you awestruck at that first ultrasound scan, at that tiny little curled up being, the twelve-week-old unborn child? You *need* Psalm 139: 'you knit me together in my mother's wombs, when my limbs were being woven in secret in the depths of the earth.' Humans need the right words, we need poetry: and God has given us so much of it. There is treasure in that closed book, vital treasure. Food for your life.

And then lastly, even though I said a few moments ago that the Bible doesn't have one message, that it's an argument, I suppose that was only half-right. Because actually, when you read the whole thing, when you see where the argument goes, how all the strands come together, there is a message. There is a big picture, a God who reveals Himself. I challenge you to seriously read the Bible, to read it regularly and deeply and widely and *not* to get that God is on the side of the weak and the poor, that God is righteous and holy, that God cares what you do with your money and with your body, that he's watching how you deal with the stranger and the prisoner. We can *over-estimate* the difficulty and complexity of the Bible: on the whole, the picture is clear and the picture is powerful. And it's through reading the Bible, soaking yourself in it, that it becomes powerful *in you*.

So the fact that, frankly, we're *not* soaked in Scripture is a problem. It's something we need to do something about.

So individually, that might mean saying to yourself, actually I will start reading the Bible regularly. Don't, whatever you do, start at page 1 and just go to the end. That way disaster lies. It was *never* meant to be read like that. There are *plenty* of more sensible ways to do it. Ask me and we'll find the one that works for you.

And maybe the thing that works for you might be the thing that works for *us*, collectively. I'm wondering, from January, of maybe finding a way that the whole church can focus on just one chapter of Scripture a week, working our way through a book. We could have one page, every week, with some notes, some questions, some ways to help you get the most from a passage at home. And maybe, too, we could begin meeting to discuss it. One chapter, every week. I wonder if there's the appetite for doing something like that? What do you think? Let me know.

Whatever we do, let this Bible Sunday be the one when we decide, collectively, to take our Bibles a bit more seriously.

Amen.

Peter Waddell