

Reflection for Pentecost 21 by Rev'd Peter Shaw

Today is Bible Sunday, a Sunday set aside by most churches throughout the world to recognise and celebrate the transformational impact of the Bible.

So, this week I would like to offer some thoughts on how we read and interpret the Bible.

It is quite interesting to look at what some children and possibly some adults too remember from their Bibles:

- For Luke 6.31 – “Do to others as you would have them do to you”, how about “do one to others before they do one to you”.
- And perhaps my favourite; from Matthew 22.14, for “many are called but few are chosen”, how about “many are cold but few are frozen”.

Where children can't quite remember, they make it up according to what seems to fit their own way of thinking. Now, of course we adults would never make such errors - or would we?

How about some of the biblical phrases that have found their way into our language? Take for instance "the sun shines on the righteous" where we conveniently miss out evil people. This particular misquote, for that is what it is, comes from Matthew 5:45; 'he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good'. We find it difficult to accept that God would make the sun shine on all of His people, including those who are evil.

Or how about "Money is the root of all evil"? A misquote of 1 Timothy 6:10 which tells us 'the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils'. In this particular misquote, we are making money the problem, not our love of it.

These are just two misquotes amongst many.

So, rather like children, we remember what we want to remember from the quotes, in the process turning the meaning around to make it suit our train of thought at the time.

Another problem with Biblical interpretation is that in our present analytical and scientific age, we often regard the bible as a textbook - the source of ultimate factual truth – using it to find answers to our questions. This approach is fine, but we must be aware of its limitations.

Firstly - even before we look, we frequently know the answer we'd like to find. So once again, we are in danger of distorting the true message of the Bible - in favour of our own requirements.

Secondly, there is a risk we might do this to gain the authority of being right, in order to score points over someone else.

Thirdly, and most fundamentally, the bible does not give categorical and verifiable answers to many of the big questions we ask.

For example, we will not find a scientifically verifiable explanation of why God allows suffering, what happens after we die, or why we are here. The bible is not a Holy Encyclopedia to be followed rigidly - but frequently that's the assumption many people seem to make.

Rather, the Bible is the story of God's loving relationship with His people – us- and you can't adequately describe relationships in logical terms. It's a story of support, encouragement, guidance, love and yes, discipline.

When reading the Bible, we must put aside our questions and preconceived ideas and just prayerfully read it, letting God's love for us and all his people - speak to us through all its pages.

The word of God only comes alive when we read the Bible and begin to interpret what it means. To do that well, we need to be careful, attentive and as informed as possible about the true circumstances surrounding each piece of it.

We must never forget that it was written over 2000 years ago, in very different cultural and social settings to those of today.

We need to read it, being prepared to have our eyes opened to what we don't want to see, particularly within ourselves.

But most of all, we must read the Bible in a true and genuine spirit of God's love, both for Him and for each other, sinners as we are. This essential point is so often forgotten or conveniently overlooked when the Bible is used to condemn something or somebody.

As Jesus says in today's reading (Matthew 22.34-end), answering the Pharisee's question about which commandment in the Law is the greatest – "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself". We need to read the Bible always with these words foremost in our minds.

To understand more of what God has to say to us through the Bible, we need to look beyond our own situation and see that God cares for all his people.

So, how can we read the bible and increase our chances of hearing God's word without distorting our interpretation?

In 2 Timothy 1:5, Paul says to Timothy 'continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it.' Timothy learned his strong faith not just by reading scripture, but from the examples set by other people – in particular his mother Eunice and grandmother Lois.

We learn everything best from people we know, people we can trust, because we've seen enough of them to know they are sound, wise people who care about us.

We all know the people who taught us best, and I hope are blessed to know some who have helped or inspired us in learning about our faith; I can certainly think of many people who have helped me enormously in my Christian journey.

There are two questions which go to the heart of what we should be as a Christian community, a vibrant part of God's church here on earth.

Who are the people in our lives who by their example, show us how to live a life of faith?

Who are we able to demonstrate our faith to? Because in the end, this is fundamentally how our faith spreads and endures - not by sermons, nor fine words, but by being as Christ to others.

Yes, the Bible is vital and fundamental to our Christian Faith - we should read it often and prayerfully, and interpret what we read fully with God's love. But we also need to be able to learn faithful living from each other, and be a beacon for Christ to those around us who are not fortunate to know Him.

For, as my Australian cousin put it,

"we are the only Bible that some people may ever read" Amen.