

Bible Sunday 2008

Psalm: 119: 33-38; Deuteronomy 8: 1-14 (excerpts); 2Timothy 3: 14 -4:5;
Matthew 4: 1-4

Today, is Bible Sunday. Up and down the nation and across the globe, Christians are celebrating this remarkable and enduring “book of books”.

Yet, in his Gospel talk last week Tim McKenzie began with mention of the deep divisions in our church today around issues of sexuality, leadership and, not the least, the place of the Bible in our life together. Episcopal theologian, Rusty Reno, in his landmark book, *In The Ruins of the Church*, also makes sad lament on this theme, noting that one of the very elements which united and defined to our church, the authority of Scripture, now rents it asunder.

It is common place to say that Anglicanism finds its identity in its liturgy, that this is where we do our theology rather than through written confession and dogma. There is, of course, some obvious truth to such a view. Yet our church, in its *39 Articles of Religion*, hammered out on the bloody anvil of the English reformation, is clear in what it says about the Bible, showing a remarkable economy and congruency with what Scripture says about itself. Scripture, the articles assert, is “God breathed”¹ in that:

- It contains all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.
- In the name of the Holy Scripture we do understand those Canonical² Books of the Old and New Testament, of whose authority there was never any doubt in the Church.

¹ 2Timothy 3:16 says: “All Scripture is God-breathed.” That is exactly what the Greek says. The adjective *theopneustos* (only here in the NT) is compounded of *theos*, “God,” and the verb *pneo*, “breathe.” This is one of the greatest texts in the NT on the inspiration of the Bible. Another outstanding passage is 2 Peter 1:21, which indicates something of how the divine inspiration took place.

² Canon” or “rule” = yardstick.

- The Old Testament is not contrary to the New: for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to humanity by Jesus Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and humanity, being both God and human being.

...

So then, two things are in essence being said here:

Firstly, Scripture is not congruent with the Word of God, who is Christ, but becomes Jesus Christ's Word for us, in so far as through it, we can find the salvation that is offered in him.

This is amazing claim regarding the authority of the Bible. This is why we reverence Scripture, why it occupies such a central place in our worship, why we carry it into our assembly lifting it high, why we stand up for it out of respect and awe, why our liturgy is so full of it, why we read it aloud, preach on it and talk about it, and why we recite it while we celebrate the Lord's Supper; in short, this is what makes it *Holy* Scripture. The Scripture is set aside as special, because it has authority in our lives, and it has authority because through it we find Jesus.

In saying this, of course, we must add a caution recorded in scripture itself: A quarter way into his Gospel, John recalls Jesus' warning to those who would complicate things in a way which blinded others to the truth, to those with an almost idolatrous view of Scripture, who would equate their theology (extrapolated from Scripture), not just with Scripture, but with God's living word expressed in Jesus himself:

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you possess eternal life. These are the same Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life. ³

The Christian Scripture is *more* than a mysterious historical artefact, more than mythopoeic tribal history, grand narrative, moral law, parable or allegory that is nice to read in church or even before we go to sleep. Yet it is not magic. Muslims call Jews and Christians, "people of the book." This is understandable since it is the Bible that shapes our identity as a people.

³ John 5:39.

Yet Christians must always understand themselves not as those who exalt their scripture, as Muslims do to the Qur'an, as literally dictated words from God but rather understand themselves as those who belong to Jesus, who know him, worship and adore him, who receive eternal life from him, *only because* of the testimony of scripture. This why Peter speaks of us being “born anew not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God.”⁴

...

The second thing our articles make clear, as do our Old Testament and Gospel readings this morning, is that the Bible is “*God breathed*” since it calls us to the same faithfulness as that to which it called Jesus – a faithfulness to follow God, come what may, to lay down our lives in God’s service; to not let the cares of this world, especially wealth, distract us from remembering God’s goodness to us and so, in gratitude, keeping God’s commandments.

It is worth remembering, as I have already mentioned, that Anglicanism was birthed in schism, none the less in bitter dispute over its understanding of the Bible and its role in our common life. Yet controversy can so easily distract us from our calling to love our Lord with our heart, mind body and soul.

Thinking on this while preparing for this sermon, I became absorbed (as you do), in the First Book of authorised Homilies, penned largely by Thomas Cranmer, the English reformer and first Archbishop of Canterbury. Published in 1547, some 2 years before his first reformed prayer book, 6 years before his Articles of Religion, and 10 years before he was burnt at the stake, I found his words deeply moving, and can no better express what I want to say to you about our need to pay the Bible close attention and give it its due.

Contrasting with Reno’s observations regarding the crisis of authority and belief in our church today, what really comes through in Cranmer’s homily is his total *confidence* in the bible and his *enthusiasm* for it. Significantly, it is Cranmer’s first homily and I want to read an excerpt from its first part. It is called:

⁴ 1 Peter 1:23.

A FRUITFUL EXHORTATION UNTO THE READING AND KNOWLEDGE OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

Unto a Christian, there can be nothing either more necessary or profitable than the knowledge of holy scripture; for, as much as in it is contained God's true word, setting forth his glory and also our duty. And there is no truth nor doctrine necessary for our justification and everlasting salvation but that is or may be drawn out of that fountain and well of truth.

Therefore as many as be desirous to enter into the right and perfect way unto God must apply their minds to know holy scripture, without the which they can neither sufficiently know God and his will neither their office and duty. And as drink is pleasant to them that be dry and meat to them that be hungry, so is the reading, hearing, searching, and studying of holy scripture to them that be desirous to know God or themselves and to do God's will.

... Therefore, forsaking the corrupt judgment of those which care not but for their carcase, let us reverently hear and read holy scripture, which is the food of the soul as Saint Matthew does teach us in his Gospel. Let us diligently search for the well of life in the books of the New and Old Testaments and not run to the stinking puddles of men's traditions devised by their imagination for our justification and salvation.

For in holy scripture is fully contained what we ought to do and what to eschew, what to believe, what to love, and what to look for at God's hands at length. In these books we shall find the Father from whom, the Son by whom, and the Holy Ghost in whom all things have their being and keeping up, and these three Persons to be but one God and one substance.

In these books we may learn to know ourselves... and also to know God, how good he is of himself and how he maketh us, and all creatures, partakers of his goodness. We may learn also in these books to know God's will and pleasure, as much as for this present time is convenient for us to know...

"There is", saith Fulgentius "abundantly enough both for men to eat and children to suck". There is whatsoever is meet [in good measure] for all ages and for all degrees and sorts.

These books, therefore, ought to be much in our hands, in our eyes, in our ears,

in our mouths, but most of all — in our hearts. For the scripture of God is the heavenly meat of our souls; the hearing and keeping of it maketh us blessed, sanctifieth us, and maketh us holy. It turneth our souls; it is a light lantern to our feet. It is a sure, steadfast, and everlasting instrument of salvation. It giveth wisdom to the humble and lowly hearts. It comforteth, maketh glad, cheereth, and cherisheth our conscience. It is a more excellent jewel, or treasure than any gold or precious stone. It is more sweet than honey or honeycomb...

The words of holy scripture be called words of everlasting life, for they be God's instrument ordained for the same purpose. They have power to turn through God's promise and they be *effectual through God's assistance*. And being *received* in a faithful heart, they have ever an heavenly spiritual working in them. They are lively, quick, and mighty in operation, and sharper than any two-edged sword, and enter through even unto the dividing asunder of the soul and the spirit or the joints and the marrow... He that keepeth the word of Christ is promised the love and favour of God and that he shall be the dwelling-place, or temple, of the blessed Trinity.

This word, whosoever is diligent to read and in their heart to print that which they readeth, the great affection to the transitory things of this world shall be diminished in them, and the great desire of the promises of God shall increase in them. And there is nothing that so much strengtheneth our faith and trust in God that so much keepeth up innocency and pureness of the heart and also of outward godly life and conversation, as continual reading and recording of God's word. For that thing, which by continual reading of holy scripture and diligent searching of the same is deeply printed and graven in the heart, at length turneth almost into nature.

And moreover, the effect and virtue of God's word is to illuminate the ignorant and to give more light unto them that faithfully and diligently read it, to conform their hearts and to encourage them to perform that which of God is commanded. It teacheth patience in all adversity, in prosperity humbleness. What honour is due unto God, what mercy and charity to our neighbour! It giveth good counsel in all doubtful things; it showeth of whom we shall look for aid and help in all perils, and that God is the only Giver of victory in all battles and temptations of our enemies, bodily and ghostly.

And in reading of God's word, they not always most profiteth that most readily turn of the book or say of it without the book, but rather, they that is most turned into it, that is most inspired with the Holy Ghost, most in their heart and life altered and changed into that thing which they readeth. They that are daily less and less proud, less wrathful, less covetous, and less desirous of worldly and vain pleasures. He that, daily forsaking his old vicious life, increaseth in virtue more and more.

And to be short, there is nothing that more maintaineth godliness of the mind and driveth away ungodliness than doeth the continual reading or hearing of God's word, if it be joined with a godly mind and a good affection to know and follow God's will. For without a clear eye, pure intent, and good mind, nothing is allowed for good before God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, **Amen.**