

SERMON

The Rt. Rev Dr Emma Ineson, The Bishop of Penrith

Today is Bible Sunday, when we give thanks for the Bible in the life of Christian faith. We commit 'to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest' the Scriptures, we pray for those who don't have access to the Bible in their own language, or for whom owning and reading a Bible is an offence under the laws of the land in which they live. The Bible. The most read book in the whole of Christian history, deliberately excluded from the bestseller lists because it would skew the results. Actually a collection of 66 different books written over 1500 years, but with an incredible coherence from start to finish. Translated, so far, into 700 languages; 5.6 billion people have access to a Bible in their own language.

And here I have a few Bibles that are special to me. This one is my family Welsh Bible. This one was given to me by the Archbishop of York on my consecration as a bishop. This one was given to me by the Gideons at school as a teenager. I wonder what the Bible means to you? For some watching this today maybe not very much. Perhaps, a few nice words at Christmas? A really interesting piece of text? An important part of our cultural heritage, the inspiration for some of our great works of art and literature; Milton's Paradise Lost, Leonardo's Last Supper.

For many of us, the Bible is that, but is so much more than that. It's the source and bedrock for all we believe and the means by which we come to know most clearly the saving love of God in Christ Jesus. Truly the Word of life.

Now, I love words. Before I was ordained, I studied language and linguistics, and in one job I worked for a company that wrote dictionaries (I know I really am that interesting). But when we're talking about the Bible we are talking about words, of course, because that's what the Bible is, a collection of words. But we're talking about so much more than words on a page. The Word of God in the Bible, points to the Living Word of God, Jesus Christ, who we come to know through its pages.

And every Sunday and on other days too, throughout the world, whether in church buildings or online, the Word of God is preached, broken open, bringing to life the words on the page to fire and inspire the life of faith.

So when we read the words of Paul to the Colossians, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly", that's an encouragement to us to focus on, to ponder, to dwell upon the Good News of Jesus Christ, and for that to influence everything we do and everything we say. Let the word of Christ make its home in you. Make sure you're well-stocked with the treasures of God's word. Make sure the riches of the word of Christ take up residence in your life. At times of great turbulence and uncertainty throughout the history of humankind, the Bible has provided a source of comfort, assurance and hope.

Her Majesty the Queen once said in a speech, "To what greater inspiration and counsel can we turn, than to the imperishable truth to be found in this treasure house, the Bible?"

It's something Jesus pointed out to his own first followers, when he was telling them about a time of great turbulence to come, when the Temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed, that even when everything around us is crumbling, even though, "Heaven and earth will pass away, my words will not pass away", says Jesus. God's word will continue throughout famine, war, pestilence, plague and pandemic.

And I wonder if this is something we particularly need to hear today? So much of what we thought we knew and the things that we trusted to be there always have been upended or taken away by COVID.

Hope is something that is in short supply at the moment. We'd hoped that we would be through this by Christmas, we had hoped that we might have a vaccine by now. We'd hoped that our lives might be getting back to normal. We'd hoped that the rates of infection would be falling and fewer people would be suffering physically, emotionally, or economically. And even in these difficult times, especially in these difficult times, the Bible gives us hope, because it shows us that God's big story and his ultimate plans for good are there for the whole created order.

It gives us hope because we read in its pages that what we see and experience here and now, is not all there is, and that God and his love and His goodness will ultimately prevail. As the Evangelist Billy Graham once said, "I've read the last page of the Bible, and it's going to turn out alright."

So this Bible Sunday can I encourage you, wherever you start from with the Bible, to consider taking it the next step? If you've never read it before, consider starting. One of the Gospels is a good place to start. If you're sceptical about the Bible, give it another chance. If you're troubled by the way that the Bible has been used to oppress, continue to wrestle the truth from it. If you know and love the Bible and you follow the God you find revealed in its pages, most especially in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, keep reading, keep studying, keep loving it, keep letting it dwell with all its riches in your life day by day with its transforming, hope-giving, life-affirming power, and if we all did that, wouldn't every Sunday be Bible Sunday?