

A service of the word

All Saints' Fishponds

28th October 2018

Bible Sunday

Isaiah 55.1–11

2 Timothy 3.14–4.5

Psalm 19.7–14

John 5.36b–47

The bible is central to our worship here at All Saints. In fact, every service in the Church of England involves at least one bible reading. Whether it is a family service or a communion service, whether it is from the old Book of Common Prayer or in the latest modern language service book, there is always a reading from the bible. This morning's service has four different bible readings, if you include the psalm we sung. That is why the proper name of this type of worship is "a service of the word". It is worship that revolves around God's word in the bible.

Why should this be so? Why does the church put such an emphasis on the bible? Why do worship leaders shape their services around the readings set for the day? Why do many people try to read the bible day by day? Why do groups get together to discuss what the bible means for each person in their daily lives? Well, I suppose I should look to today's bible readings for some clues.

Our New Testament reading comes from the second letter to Timothy. This is a letter of encouragement to a young church leader, and through him to the whole church. It was written at a time when those who had known Jesus personally were growing old and dying. Timothy is warned that there will be difficult times ahead, but he should hold firm to the message, which he has received. One of the guides that he has for this is the “Holy Scriptures”. The written word, which has been inspired by God, is useful guidance for living. This is one of the things that will not change in a changing world.

Yet there are many other books that have been written, which offer advice on how to live our lives. Many of those are easier to read and seem more relevant to modern life. Why do we think the bible is special and more important than any other book?

Our Old Testament reading gives another clue to this. This comes from near the end of the book of Isaiah. The writings and sayings in this part of Isaiah were intended to reassure the people of Israel. The final image in this reading compares the word of God to snow and rain. In a hot and dry land, such as Israel, water is needed to bring life and growth. The reading suggests that the word of God can have a similar affect on people.

This is the experience many people have. Reading the bible in a prayerful way can open our hearts and minds to his Holy Spirit. Praying through a bible reading can allow God to show us how he is working in the world today. Thinking ourselves into the stories in the bible can help us see how God wants us to be and to act. The bible can be like God's rain from above, causing the seed of faith to sprout and grow.

However, I think that today's gospel reading gives the clearest reason why the bible is important to Christians. Why is the bible important to Christians? The answer is in the name. If we are Christians, we follow Christ. As Jesus says in the gospel reading, the bible points to Christ. If we want to follow Jesus, we cannot really do it without reading the bible.

Although there is much good advice in the bible, there is also much that is confusing and misleading. It is not a handbook for life, in the way suggested by the advice given to Timothy. This is where the people challenging Jesus had gone wrong. At its heart, the bible is a story, not an instruction book. It is a story about God and about people, which culminates in the central story of Jesus. To search it for instructions about how to live, without relating that to the one that the story is about is always going to lead to confusion.

It is also why some people do not find the bible feels like refreshing rain coming from above. Approaching the bible, with the wrong ideas about who God is, will not bring us any closer to him. This is why being part of the church community makes such a difference. Reading the bible together and discussing what we hear helps everyone grow in wisdom and faith. When we are open to the Holy Spirit talking through others, we can grow closer to one another and to God. When we share our insights into how the bible relates to our own lives, we can strengthen our faith and that of others.

The bible matters, because it points to Christ. That is clearest in the gospels. If you are new to reading the bible and want somewhere to start, find some wet and miserable afternoon or evening and read Mark's gospel all the way through. It only takes a few hours, but goes through the whole ministry of Jesus. It is a surprisingly good read.

Alternatively, if you want to do something regular, there are a lot of bible reading plans that can guide you. From the rather intense bible in a year programs to simply looking at the readings set for the Sunday, there is something for every level of commitment and busyness of schedule.

If you want to read the bible with others, we have two different groups, which meet together to read the bible and pray. The Pilgrim group on a Thursday afternoon and the home group on Wednesday evening both involve reading the bible and thinking and talking about what it means to us in our lives. If neither of these is suitable, talk to me or Diane or Lizzie and we will see what can be arranged.

The bible matters because if we follow Christ, we need to know him. The starting point for this is the bible. The bible points to Christ. It tells his story and gives his teaching. It explains his background and reflects on his life. To follow Christ without reading the bible is like trying to put together Ikea furniture without the instructions. There are a few people who can do it, but usually those are the ones who have been practicing for a long time. The rest of us make a real mess of it.

Let us pray

Lord Jesus Christ,
Open our eyes to your way,
Open our minds to your truth,
Open our hearts to your life
through the words of the bible
and the power of the Holy Spirit.

All **Amen**