



25 October 2020  
The Last Sunday After Trinity  
Sermon – St James's Piccadilly  
The Revd Dr Mariama Ifode-Blease  
**'Jesus is the Word'**

*May I speak in the name of the Triune God,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*

[Recording of singing by Mariama played to  
the congregation]

Jesus loves me  
Oh yes, He does  
for the Bible tells me so.<sup>1</sup>

Today is Bible Sunday. I wonder which parts of the Bible you feel tell you that you are known, that you are called, and that you are loved. For some of us, there may be several key passages: stories from Jesus's life, the poetry of the psalms, some of the images from the Hebrew Bible, the cross, the resurrection. For others of us, there may be fewer passages because we have a different relationship with the Bible, because of what we have been told it is and it isn't, and because of how it has been interpreted, used and abused.

In this month in which we celebrate Black History Month, I cannot help but recognised that the Bible and slavery worked well together. Genesis 9 was misinterpreted, Ham, one of Noah's sons, was made black and the justification for a trade in human beings was found. Similarly, the words of Ephesians 6:5-7 were misused to support the subjugation of peoples for

the profit of our cities, our banks, our ancient institutions.<sup>2</sup> Yet, for people who were enslaved, the Bible also offered hope, and inspired the fight to regain a freedom that had already been theirs since birth. Even in the darkness of ruptured identity and stolen lives, the Bible inspired the "hymns and spiritual songs to God" of which the letter to the Colossians speaks.

The Gospel reading today is as odd as it is intriguing. On the surface it is not a passage that tells of an intimate relationship with the Jesus who healed the sick, fed the hungry and raised people from the dead. Yet I would argue that it is still a passage that tells us that we are loved. The image is a bit much. It's outrageous in its drama and it is, frankly, more Hollywood than arthouse cinema. Whatever we think of this image presented by Matthew, it is clear that Jesus is at the centre of it. The angels of course have a role to play – they always do – but Jesus is there, and this is the climax of the chapter. As one commentator suggests: "the paragraph in vv.29-31 ends the tribulation and narrates the Parousia [the presence and return of Jesus] in the traditional language of the Old Testament theophany [this visible manifestation of God] so that Jesus' coming is the arrival of God's glory"<sup>3</sup> (Allison Jr 2001: 877).

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<sup>1</sup> Words by Anna Bartlett Warner and Hymn by William Bradbury Batchelder

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<sup>2</sup> <https://time.com/5171819/christianity-slavery-book-excerpt/>

<sup>3</sup> Dale C Allison Jr, 'Matthew' in Barton, John and Muddiman John, *The Oxford Biblical Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp.844-886.

This image is totally different from the Jesus who asked his apostles not to tell anyone about his true identity, who seeks quiet and solace away from the crowds. The difference now of course is that Jesus has died, he has risen, and now we see that he will come again. I want us to go back to the death and remember what Jesus said in that moment. Rowan Williams reminds us that “Jesus dies crying *tetelestai*’ It is finished’; the work is completed. That single word *tetelestai*, carries within it a deep sense of the cross as victory. There has been a mortal struggle and Jesus and emerged victorious<sup>4</sup> (Williams 2017: 39). We may not get anything from this image, but we will probably all be able to agree that this is an image of victory. And we need to understand victory on our own terms. Victory will mean something different to each of us. Our personal victories (when we feel able to overcome what has been and what may still be) are deep and private, and God sees them all.

*Tetelestai*. It is finished. The work is complete. I don’t know about you, but there are days when I wake up when nothing feels complete, not even me. So this is a call to dependence. Pure, unadulterated dependence on God, through Jesus, because God’s got it. It’s sorted. My huffing and puffing matters only to a point. Dependence not on myself, my education, my skills or training, not on our resources, relative wealth and means, not on our beloved St James’s even, but on God. That is the call of this image; we are called into a composition that is already complete. This Titian-like image is bound by a promise that: “heaven

and earth will pass away, but my [Jesus’s] words will not pass away”.

We see that this echoes the letter to the Colossians: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom”. Jesus’s words and Jesus as Word will not pass away. As a gifted preacher reminded me recently, we are living within a “life [that] is eternal and [a] love [that] is immortal. It’s hard to be constantly aware of this reality so we live in a more manageable framework relating to the span of a human life and a human story”.<sup>5</sup> We are living within a narrative that is shaped by the cross, a story that is full, filled through time and by love, that anticipates our sense of incompleteness and gathers in our failures.

This Bible Sunday we are reminded that:  
Jesus [not *Grease*] is the word, it's the word that you heard  
It's got groove it's got meaning  
Jesus is the time, is the place, is the motion  
Jesus is the way we are feeling.<sup>6</sup>

*Tetelestai*. It is finished. The work is complete. The work of Jesus as a manifestation of God’s love is complete. The work of Jesus’s new configuration of this world is not. New Testament scholar Jerome Murphy-O’Connor tells us that “the expression ‘word of Christ’ is unique but synthesizes a number of concepts found earlier in the letter to the Colossians; ‘the word of truth, the gospel’ (1:5) is ‘the word of God’ (1:25), which is God’s mystery, that is Christ’ (2:3). Its power within each one (1:6, 10) must find socially

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<sup>4</sup> Rowan Williams, *God with Us* (SPCK: London, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Rev’d Lucy Winkett, Sunday Worship, Radio 4, ‘Heaven is a Noisy Place’, 6 September 2020: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000mbpf>.

<sup>6</sup> Adapted from ‘Grease is the Word’, Songwriters: Barry Gibb, *Grease* (2006 Remaster) lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group.

beneficial expression” (Murphy-O’Connor 2001: 1197).<sup>7</sup>

We find ourselves, therefore, at a crossroads. We are asked to accept either the image of this victorious resurrected Son of Man, or the word of Christ dwelling richly within us. Which will we choose? Jesus must be somewhere. He can’t be nowhere. But let us be clear about the responsibility of this rich dwelling place of Jesus in us. It means recognising that we live in community, that we are interdependent, that our stories are intertwined. When Quobna Ottobah Cugoano was baptised in St James’s Piccadilly on 20th August 1773 and I made my declaration of Assent two weeks ago here in this same church, it was the Bible that united us. I held the Bible in my right hand. The bible’s words would have resonated through Cugoano’s Baptism. I wonder if, as a teenager, he was given a Bible as gift on that occasion. When we read Scripture on Sunday, this defiant act links us to those who read it in secret, fearful that they may be found out, discovered as followers of Christ. Reading the Bible is not a Fortnum and Mason Hamper, a treat for special occasions or that thing that we wish we had but would never actually buy for ourselves. It is the water that runs from our taps waiting to be captured, well-used, not wasted because for us it is free.

Black History Month is made up of thousands, and tens of thousands of stories to which one month could never do justice. But a month is a vital start. It is good to recognise that there are so many stories waiting to be unearthed, waiting to be read,

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<sup>7</sup> Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, ‘Colossians’ in Barton, John and Muddiman John, *The Oxford Biblical Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp.1191-1199.

waiting to be heard. The call on our lives towards an incarnate faith recognises the plurality of God’s story in us, no matter our own history, no matter our present. God waits for the expression of Her Word in us. And we have to translate the Bible, the messages of hope and light and freedom with our lives. *Our lives* need to become a living translation of the word of Christ.

As a modern linguist, it thrills me to know that the Bible is still the most translated book: “at least one book of the Bible has been translated into 2,883 languages; the New Testament has been translated into 1,329 languages; and the Old and New Testaments together have been translated into 531 languages”.<sup>8</sup>

When I was living in Santiago de Compostela as an undergraduate, I remember one evening having dinner with friends in our hostel. As someone who was fairly confident in her Spanish skills, I started to talk rather fluidly (or so I thought) about the meal, its flavour and the condiments on the table. Instead of saying the word I thought meant ‘condiments’ in Spanish I ended up saying the Spanish word that meant ‘condoms’. There was a short silence before the lads I was sitting gently corrected my choice of vocabulary. I was mortified. They healed my mortification with laughter and teasing.

Our translations of the Word of Christ in us may not always reflect the truth of God. They may be marred by our own misunderstanding of who God is, our grandstanding, our wrong choice of word and action. But God remains. Jesus remains.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.tomedes.com/translator-hub/which-worlds-most-translated-book.php#:~:text=The%20Bible%20remains%20the%20world's,be%20read%20in%20670%20languages> .

Love remains, and love waits for us to step into the completeness of our formation so that Christ may be made known in and through us for the world to see and *feel* that Jesus is the Word.

Amen.