



**St James's
Church
Piccadilly**

**Bible Sunday
23 October 2022
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Holy God, may your word be a lamp for our feet and a light for our path. Amen.

It may sound like we have three readings this morning, as we usually do – an excerpt from a letter to a community two millennia ago, a psalm written long before that – at least five centuries before Paul's letters – and a Gospel passage written around 60 years after Christ's death. The author began to compile sources and assemble his unique narrative of Jesus' life a few years after Paul wrote his letter to the Romans.

We have at least five readings, not just three. Paul quotes Psalm 69 to make his point about needing to embrace differences and tensions in a community for its own wellbeing. The wider context of his quotation is:

It is zeal for your house that has consumed me;
the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.

...

¹³ But as for me, my prayer is to you, O LORD.
At an acceptable time, O God,
in the abundance of your steadfast love, answer me.

Paul uses this element from a psalm not only because he wants to encourage the community of people following Jesus in Rome, but also because Paul, as a Jewish man, is part of a tradition that has the Hebrew Bible at the heart of all its meanings and at the heart of life's purpose, in fusion with God's promise.

Right at the beginning of what I'd like to share with you today, let me be clear: the Bible is not literally the word of God. It never has been. It is a lamp to our feet, and a light to our path, but the two different stories of the creation of the world in Genesis are not a biology textbook. The Book of Revelation should not be read as a travelogue about the features of hell. The Gospels give us four distinct portraits of Jesus, and they were written by and for very different communities who had needs, fears and hopes that were distinct from one another. The Bible is full of anguish, tales of terrible leadership and brutal violence, and stories of oppression both historical and metaphorical. It is also full of hope, justice, love, faith, and abundance. 'I came that you may have life and have it abundantly', Jesus says in the Gospel of John.

Today we celebrate Esther as she enters into the Christian life, surrounded by family, friends, and the people of God. Her name comes from a book in the Bible about a woman who dares greatly, standing up for her people. If you've not read it, perhaps this week would be a great time to do so, in Esther's honour. Because of Esther, we all get a double sacrament today, as we express holy hospitality that belongs to God in both baptism and the Eucharist. We do a lot of remembering today – remember your own baptism, how you were marked with the cross in oil on your foreheads – an indelible yet invisible, to the human eye, sign of being named and called by God in the most tender and compassionate way. We

remember that Jesus's body and blood, his heartbreak and hope for humanity, are present for us in the food we share around the altar. These things are so intertwined that it goes far beyond words. Just enter into the mystery, as Esther is doing today, and come to the feast. See what happens.

If anyone here is not baptised and would like to be, talk to any of the clergy after the service and we can explore it with you. It's an adventure, rooted in God's earth, that directs us towards living well in this life and invites us into eternal life. I was baptised when I was 16. I'm thankful for it every day. It reminds me that I'm part of something so much bigger. It connects me to what the letter to the Hebrews calls 'the great cloud of witnesses'. My ancestors and yours, in a chosen family of hope. That's, among other things, a relief that as one person I am not ever an isolated island, but I belong. You belong.

Jesus assures us in every word that we do belong, and not just because he was the very definition of good trouble in a troubled world, creating connections with everyone in radical hospitality no matter what the consequences might be. There are no outsiders.

In our Gospel from Luke, Jesus quotes the Book of Isaiah, which is full of hope and promise – and which was written by at least three authors across centuries which included the trauma of Israelite exile in Babylon. They were taken away from their homes for many, many years. And they found paths towards hope by writing new scripture.

When Jesus spoke the words of Isaiah, which are words of freedom and hope for the oppressed and the abused, he was doing so in Nazareth, where he'd grown up. He stands up in the synagogue. He does not choose the text himself – someone in the synagogue gives it to him. He unrolls it and starts to read.

The first response is silence. They gaze at him.

The second, once Jesus has said that what must have felt like a distant dream of liberation is fulfilled – it's happening now, because he is who he is.

The people's second response is to be confused – 'Is this the same person who grew up in a carpenter's shop down the road?'

Jesus responds by predicting what they'll say next, and what they'll expect of him. But, Jesus says, he's already felt their reluctance to really believe that what he just said about Isaiah's words being put into action could really be true.

Perhaps another way of framing Jesus' response to the people around him is 'if you can't open your hearts right now, I won't force you to accept anything I say. Take it, with all its hope and liberation, or don't. I'm bringing Isaiah's words to life. For you, they're dead on the page, at least for now.'

The people become so angry that they chase him out of the town – his own childhood home – and trap him on the edge of a cliff, hoping he'll fall over the edge.

Jesus calmly walks away.

They could have responded in all kinds of ways. But they were afraid of the message. Jesus' words made them too uncomfortable.

There is always more to discover in our sacred texts: more than meets the eye, the ear, the mind, and the heart. What will strike you as most interesting or give you cause for pause, critique, or doubt, may be different today in church than if you'd read it yesterday, or at home, or with another group of people. Rowan Williams has said that the Bible 'is a gift, a challenge and an invitation into a new world, seeing yourself afresh and more truthfully.'

When we hear the Bible, whether within a service or not, a text from within it that we could carry with us might be taken from Psalm 69 again: 'In the abundance of your steadfast love, answer me.' That's because if we're not asking questions while we read, mark, learn and inwardly digest – feeding on its strange and vital nourishment – we're not paying attention.

This week a new podcast on theology, the Bible and identity has been launched. The podcast is called 'Sunday School for Misfits', and it's presented by Selina Stone, an academic at Durham. As a Black woman, Stone explores the urgent need for justice and wisdom. She says this about the Bible:

'We're all having to do interpretation. What I'm going to see when I come to the text is different to what you're going to see when you come to the text.'

Every experience you've ever had will shape the way you encounter the Bible's words.

Selina Stone says 'When I talk about critical thought it can make people nervous...I'm not talking about criticising God. When we talk about God we're making big jumps you know, because we don't know enough.' If we could know God fully, God would not be God.

Stone's way of opening up the big questions is an invitation to go more deeply into the Bible because we're searching for meaning that helps us to live better. As Paul puts it in Romans for us this morning, 'whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.'

On Wednesday I went to a gathering of clergy theologians down the road at St Martin's. There were over 50 priests under 40 (I'm teetering on the edge of this age group, by the way). We gathered to listen to two scholars, one a lay Methodist from Oxford, Anthony Reddie, and the other a Church of England priest in Hendon, Julie Gittoes. Anthony talked about James Cone, the Black American theologian about whom he's just written a superb book.

Reddie reminded us that for white people, Cone's Black theology cannot speak fully into our experience. It was written for everyone to consider and ponder, but it has the struggles and oppression – and the longing for liberation – for Black people at its core. Here is what Cone says about the Bible:

'the biblical witness says God is a God of liberation, who speaks to the oppressed and abused and assures them...divine righteousness will vindicate their suffering...[and that] it is the Bible that tells us that God became human in Jesus Christ so that the kingdom of God would make freedom a reality for all human beings.'

May it be so. May that freedom be what we strive for and what we hope for, as we read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest our holy and challenging scriptures together.

Amen.