

Bible Sunday 28 October 2012

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5 and John 5:36b-47

I've been back from Uganda for less than 2 weeks and it already seems a distant memory – my experiences there have been quickly overtaken by what happened at work while I was away; how has the family been; the mountains of washing and ironing and the small matter of a PCC meeting on my first full evening back! I have at last finished taking the dreaded malaria tablets.

People have wanted to know how I got on, I've shown the photos to some and plan, with Caroline, to tell as many as I can of what we saw, learned and what together as a church we can contribute to make the link between St Peters and the Diocese of Northern Uganda a stronger one.

One of the things I love about any trip – be it an afternoon's walk or 3 weeks in Uganda – is the initial stages of planning. I love looking at guidebooks and maps. Reading up about the places I'll visit, thinking about the best order in which to do things, the people I will need to contact to make the best use of the time I have, what new kit I'll need and whether existing kit needs mending. Caroline will tell you that I'm a bit obsessive about my packing – everything has its' place and I don't take more than I need. When I arrive at my destination though I like to be alert to the possibility of seeing things I hadn't expected or read about. That serendipity that comes from looking down an alley way and seeing something interesting that isn't described in any book. Or the chance encounter with a stranger with whom you share something memorable, or find something in common. Although I loathe the chore of writing postcards and finding a post office, I know how much pleasure they bring to those who receive them, who in some way then share a little in my experience. Above all, the joy of any trip is pleasure in exploring new places and discovering new things in familiar places. I've been privileged to visit Uganda three times now – I've seen new things on each trip and have seen transformation, in Gulu especially, from war, to the joy of fragile peace, to the hope and hard work of rebuilding shattered communities.

One of the things I love about being a Christian is the pleasure of exploring the Bible. Today is Bible Sunday and it's good to be reminded of how we can set about exploring it. Because you know it is about you and me – all human relationships are to be found in it. It is historically important – it has influenced the actions of generations of people around the world and its laws underpin most judicial systems. It answers the big questions – why are we here and what should we do while we are here. It tells us about God. And as Christians we believe that it is more than just a book, it is the 'Word of God'. We believe that God speaks to us through it. It will challenge, inspire, thrill, excite and change those who read it. Just as I find that on a trip I find pleasure in exploring new places and discovering new things in familiar places; I find that reading and re-reading the Bible doesn't become jaded – God always has something new to tell me, or remind me of something I had forgotten. It helps to limit the extent to which I conform to the ways of the world; instead it works to transform my mind to the ways of God. We read it to 'know God better, to love what he loves, to cherish what he cherishes, to hate what he hates and to shape our whole minds and hearts'. The letter to Timothy points to scripture as being of practical use. We use it to show us how to live; to make us wise enough to have faith in Jesus and to be trained to do all kinds of good deeds. To be faithful to the Word of God will require us to go against the trends of the world. But you know the Christian message isn't about pointing out what is wrong – it's much more positive than that – it's about helping us to find what's right.

Of course it was designed to be listened to rather than read. Reading it out loud helps; but you might like to try listening to the Bible being read by actors. This is a short extract from John's gospel – the feeding of the five thousand. It can be found on the Bible Society Website –you've got time – the whole of the New Testament is there – listen to it when you are walking to dog, doing the washing up, on the bus. Familiarise yourself with it, it's such an easy way to do it.

<https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/about-bible-society/what-we-do/our-work/youve-got-the-time/>

Parents and godparents promise to support children in prayer, example and teaching. One of the greatest pleasures is watching children learn to love books; that starts of course with reading to them. I recommend that as well as reading some of the wonderful children's stories to Henry and Daniel that you also read to them some of the great stories of the Bible so that they become familiar with them very early and as they grow older they will have a good foundation on which to build their own faith.

Of course, the Bible is more than just stories. We believe that is the Word of God and that gives it an importance beyond other books of history, poetry, literature and wisdom. It points us to a relationship with God and the New Testament in recording the teachings of Jesus gives us the clear example as to how we should live our lives.

A word of warning – one Jesus gives in John's gospel. Whilst we are encouraged to study, read and reflect on scripture we should be careful not to over intellectualise it. Study it yes, become absorbed by it yes, but be careful that it doesn't simply become an academic exercise. Jesus told his critics that they had missed the point of their reading – they had failed to see that Moses had written about Jesus and when they saw and heard Jesus they didn't make the connection. Don't let our reading of the Bible become an arid academic exercise. Equally we should be careful not to let our reading or listening become mindless, skimming over familiar words, or avoiding the difficult passages. God wants us to engage with his word; he wants it to challenge us, to encourage us, to inspire us. At times we won't understand. The more we read it though, the better the connections we make. We begin to see patterns. I don't know if you watch 'Only Connect' on BBC 4. I find it fascinating, how seemingly unconnected words and phrases, pictures and sounds are linked. If you had to say what connects Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, what would you say? Those who know the Bible would say – gospel writers. Those who have a general knowledge of western culture, but no bible knowledge, probably would also be able to answer correctly. However, many of the things that Jesus said, make greater sense when the context of the Old Testament scriptures are understood too. And that only comes with continued reading and study. One that is, I suggest, both rewarding and helpful.

One of the pleasures of coming home from a trip is sharing what one has seen and heard. And also one of the pleasures of finding new things and being reminded of those familiar things in the Bible is sharing it with others. That's one of the reasons we have small groups so that we can combine our experience of listening to God. In the same way that we read guidebooks and follow maps, we can benefit from study guides, concordances and different translations of the Bible. I've just ordered a copy of Paul Langham's new book – Who? He describes it as a book for people who don't read the Bible; a stepping stone for those who have never made it past the cover of a New Testament and a refresher for those who have got stuck. He has tried to imagine how the New Testament authors might have written had they been alive today. I'm looking forward to reading it. I'm expecting it to enrich my understanding and to help me where I have become complacent with the ways of the world.

The people I met in Uganda have yet again made me realise how rich I am, simply having the resources available to read, to listen and to explore. At a confirmation service in Pakwello, Bishop Johnson made it clear that the candidates did not have their own Bibles. Bibles are available in their language but are expensive. They are therefore denied something that is so readily available here. And of course, many will not be able to read. The Bible Society is working to fill that gap. £4 a month will provide translation and printing and the provision of audio bibles.

That's not the end of the advert! Don Carson encourages us to read our Bibles regularly, not just a verse a day to keep the devil away. May we develop a habit of reading or listening as part of our desire to be transformed by the renewing of our minds and to see that we are changed, in our words and our actions to more like Jesus.