

Today is Bible Sunday, a day when we appreciate more than usual the amazing contribution to our faith in God, made by having the Bible accessible to us all in our own language. This is a luxury that we in England have enjoyed for only the last 500 years, since the pioneering work of William Tyndale – the local lad from Stinchcombe, near Dursley, in Gloucestershire. Before him, only the latin *Vulgate* – the work attributed to St Jerome – was used in churches; and *that* was not freely available to everyone, in the absence of printing.

What you may *not* know is that Tyndale made his purpose of translating original Biblical texts into English known to the then Bishop of London, Cuthbert Tunstall, who refused him permission to produce this "heretical" text. *The church wanted to control our interpretation of what is written in Scripture.* Fleeing England, and betrayed to the authorities, Tyndale completed and published the first edition of his New Testament in 1526 in Worms, near Frankfurt, in Germany.

Today, when the Bible is regarded as just another commodity, part of the wallpaper of our Church life, it is too easy to forget that Scripture can have very powerful effects. That is, Scripture *can* have very powerful effects on our lives *if* we bother to access it, to read it, to listen to God speaking to us through it, and to act on it.

It is a constant surprise to me how little some regularly Church-going Christians know of the contents of Scripture. Few today seem to bother to sit down by themselves to '*hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest*' its contents, as Cranmer's collect (for the second Sunday in Advent) in his *First English Prayer Book* has exhorted us **all** to do, since 1549.

As individual Christians, we are greatly impoverished *and dis-empowered* if we neglect to cultivate a working knowledge of Scripture for ourselves.

Today's Gospel recounts the powerful use of Scripture by Jesus himself in what St Luke presents as the inaugural address of Jesus' ministry, his manifesto, the purpose of his teaching ministry.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." (v18-19)

The story is familiar, the words from Isaiah are familiar; but there are a few things I want to point out this morning: the role of the Holy Spirit; the impact on society; and the effect on Jesus' hearers.

THE ROLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

St Luke builds up this mission statement of Jesus by emphasising the work of God the Holy Spirit in Jesus' life.

Immediately after his gracing by the **descent** of the Holy Spirit at his baptism, Jesus is **led** '*by the Holy Spirit*' into the wilderness to prove his mettle. He passed the test with flying colours.

Then, Jesus '**filled** *with the power of the Holy Spirit*' (4v14) returned to Galilee and began to preach and teach in the Synagogues. In the Synagogue of his childhood in Nazareth, he unrolled the scroll of Scripture and read '*The spirit of the Lord is upon me...etc.*' (4v18).

Luke portrays Jesus as **impelled** by the Holy Spirit into his ministry, to preach and to teach with power. Those words from Isaiah must have been read many times in that Synagogue, but Jesus, by the power of Holy Spirit, made them live.

The lesson for *our* use of Scripture is that it is the work of the Holy Spirit *on us* that makes Scripture live. Take a few minutes to be silent, calm your thoughts, centre yourself and become alert to the Spirit of God *before* you read Scripture; it will make the whole experience more meaningful, it will allow Scripture to live.

THE IMPACT ON SOCIETY

Despite what today's politicians want us to believe about religion staying out of politics, the mission statement of Jesus has a distinct social element.

Jesus is not just proclaiming a *personalised* deliverance and healing ministry, he is '*proclaim[ing] the year of the Lord's favour*' (v19); that is the year of Jubilee, when all financial debts are forgiven, the year of social restitution.

Jesus' mission statement is not just about the up-and-down of the Cross, the relationship between the individual and God; it is also about the side-to-side of the Cross, the God-breathed relationships *between* human beings transforming the way communities of the faithful, and society at large, operates.

Both are *essential* parts of Jesus' proclamation of his Gospel Mission; both are also essential parts of *our* proclamation of that same Gospel. No Gospel can be more liberating than the proclamation of the Lord's favour, the Lord's forgiveness, the Lord's restitution of social wrongs and disadvantage, the Lord's freedom.

As we come to let Scripture dwell richly in *our* hearts, through our own examination of it, we come to recognise the central importance of these two directions of the Cross; up-and-down, our relationship with God; and side-to-side, our relationships with each other in our Christian communities and in society as a whole. Both form the legitimate mission of **all** Christians, even you and me!

THE EFFECT ON JESUS' HEARERS

There is plenty of evidence in the Gospels that Jesus recognised that his Gospel Mission would bring division as well as freedom and fulfilment.

At Thursday's Eucharist, we discussed Jesus' recognition that belief in his Gospel would turn brother against brother, parent against child, and child against parent – based on Luke 12v49-53. Jesus says "*I have come to bring fire on the earth and how I wish it were already kindled... and what stress I am under until it is completed!*" (12v49-50).

It doesn't fit with our *false* conception of gentle Jesus meek and mild; but it fits with the *reality* of Jesus' Gospel message, and with the *experiences* of the Early Church.

In today's Gospel, we catch a glimpse of that division as Jesus words are doubted and rejected by those of his birth-community. '*Isn't this Joseph's son?*' they ask; why should we believe in him if he doesn't perform miracles here like those we hear he did in Capernaum; we want to see for ourselves. But, Jesus uses no coercion to get his friends to believe; he accepts their rejection '*a prophet is never accepted in his home town*' (4v24) and moves on.

Perhaps it is not surprising then that the Bible and its interpretation has also been a source of *division* as well as *blessing*; and still is today, witness the heated appeals to scripture in the homosexuality and women's ministry debates.

Tyndale's desire to make Scripture freely available in English for everyone to read, form opinions and act on was counterbalanced by Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall's desire to make sure that the interpretation of the Bible remains controlled by the Church. This is a dynamic not as far away from *contemporary* Christian issues as we might like to think.

Information liberates and power seeks to keep control; this dynamic shapes much of contemporary politics in the world *and* in the Church, from the Arab spring to Diocesan finances.

It is only the truly radical individual, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and realistically proclaiming the Gospel that can break through this dynamic and proclaim God's favour to the world.

It is only Jesus who can truly set people free.