



The French philosopher Voltaire once said, 'A hundred years from my death the Bible will be a museum piece.' A hundred years after his death the French Bible Society set up its headquarters in Voltaire's old home in Paris.

On Bible Sunday we celebrate the most popular – but often un-read – book in the world. Under-read in the West at any rate. And yet when the new sovereign is given a Bible at his or her coronation it's with these words, 'We present you with this book, the most valuable thing that this world affords. Here is wisdom; this is the royal law; these are the lively oracles of God.' You couldn't set the bar much higher.

This is the book on which civilisations have been founded, for which people have given their lives to the flames, for which people have risked everything so they could smuggle it into repressive countries, the book that people in distant countries, this very day, are desperate to own. And it sits on our shelves, undisturbed.

Jesus was much more respectful of the scriptures. Indeed, in today's reading from Luke we see him affirming three essential elements of Judaism – the scriptures, the sabbath and the synagogue. All adult males were permitted to read the scriptures and to comment on it, as the somewhat informal synagogue service became a characteristic form of sabbath observance. From the time of Jesus onwards we see both synagogue and scriptures growing in influence and importance until, after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 and destruction of the Temple, the synagogue emerged as a substitute for the Temple, though without altar or priest, and Judaism became a religion of the Book.

Jesus honoured the Book at this sabbath service, and read from Isaiah 61.1-2. He then made one of his most daring claims ever, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' Not only was he defining what his messianic role was, he was also identifying it with himself. The passage is from Isaiah and shows that the messiah would bring to reality the longings and hopes of the poor, oppressed and imprisoned, and would also usher in the amnesty and liberation associated with the year of jubilee. 'And, as a matter of fact,' says Jesus, 'the messiah who's going to do that is me.'

At first the other worshippers are amazed, but as Jesus goes on to challenge their receptivity of this great good news, their amazement turns to anger. He says that places like Capernaum with its high proportion of non-Jews are more receptive than his home town. The tension that erupts here is not actually between Jesus and Judaism (Jesus remained a loyal Jew) but between Jews and their own scriptures, which pointed out, as early as the covenant with Abraham, that God's grace extended to all people. Why would they not accept the truth of their own scriptures? Shock, horror – and they tried to hurl him off a cliff.

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What we see here is Jesus' utter commitment to the hallowed words he had known since childhood, but we also see how Jesus understood their radical potential. Indeed it was his constant radicalising of the Law that got him into trouble more than his flouting of it.

It usually takes someone with a big vision to point out the implications of what has become too familiar to us. Mahatma Gandhi said, 'You Christians look after a document containing enough dynamite to blow all civilisations to pieces, turn the world upside down, and bring peace to a battle-torn planet. But you treat it as though it's nothing more than a piece of literature!'

Bible Sunday invites us to return to our core document with the same enthusiasm that Jesus went to his, and that Jews and Muslims today go to theirs. Yes, it's complex. It's a library of 66 books written over hundreds of years. It has many different genres – law, history, poetry, prayers, love songs, visions in the night, letters and apocalyptic, as well as the particular, thrilling form of narrative we call gospel. But complexity invites engagement, not avoidance.

The Bible isn't magic, nor is it a code book, nor is it omniscient - only God possesses that attribute. It's not really a book of even texture, either; some of the early history and the legal codes are somewhat lumpy to say the least. But it's God's book. It's God's book for us, and our book about God. The Bible's understanding of itself is that it's not divine dictation but rather 'God-breathed', with shafts of beauty and truth breaking through everywhere. In essence it's a glorious love story as God pursues God's wayward people to give them back their birthright – life in all its fullness.

So how shall we read it? One answer is, with head, heart and hands – head to grapple with it, heart to love God through it, hands to obey what God says in it. More subtly the former Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks say, 'The Bible isn't a book to be read and put down. It's God's invitation to join the conversation between heaven and earth.' The idea of a conversation is a fruitful one. The Bible is a friend and companion, and the way we relate to friends is to love them, debate with them, enjoy them, learn from them, sometimes be annoyed by them, but to know that through the relationship we'll be able to learn more both about ourselves and about them. The Bible is a trustworthy friend.

Another way of approaching the Bible, particularly the narratives and gospels, is to be open to it at three levels. The first is the *literal or historical* level. In today's reading about Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth we want to know what happened and why, what it meant to the various players and how it fitted into the whole narrative Luke is giving us. There are plenty of questions to be asked about the nature of 1st century synagogue worship, why Jesus chose to read that passage, and what we can infer from the inconsistent reactions of the other worshippers.



A second level at which the passage can be read is *theological*. The question here isn't so much what happened then, but what does it mean for our understanding now? Here we're being introduced to the counter-intuitive idea of the Messiah as a servant of the poor and oppressed and not as a military leader intent on driving out the nation's enemies. This is the kind of Saviour, the kind of God, that we now know we need. The ways of violence are self-repeating and self-defeating. Ultimately the old ways will only be defeated on a cross.

A third level of interpretation and application is the *personal or mystical* one. What we're concerned with here is the impact of this passage on our inner lives and resulting behaviour. Can I hear Jesus reading those words to me? Can I hear the promise of good news, release from my self-imposed captivities, recovery of sight where I simply can't see where truth and love should take me, freedom from the various things I sense oppressing me? How can I respond to this liberating announcement of a new day, a new opportunity to enjoy the glorious liberty of the children of God? This is the level of interpretation where the sacred centre of my life is fed and changed.

One theologian called the Bible 'food for wrestlers'. The Bible is captivating and enthralling, sharp-edged and challenging. And for Christians it's unavoidable. Today's reading from Isaiah 45 says 'from my mouth has gone forth... a word that shall not return.' It's out there; it won't go away; we have to wrestle with it. But scripture is not there as an obstacle course. As our other reading from Romans 15 assures us, '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.'

I was once sitting in a park in Cape Town waiting for a service to begin. I was dressed in a clerical shirt and collar and so easily identified when an elderly African woman came up to me and said she wanted to pray for me. Never one to refuse such a gift I opened myself to her prayers. The main request of the prayers was that I should be 'covered in the blood of the lamb' but more alarmingly the prayers were accompanied by her hitting me over the head with her big black Bible and then all the way down to my feet and back again. I suppose it was her way of 'covering' me. I was getting slightly dizzy with this and on the point of suggesting I was probably pretty well covered by now when the prayer came to a final, glorious 'Amen', and I staggered off.

This is not a use of the Bible I would usually commend. Certainly the Bible has force and impact but it needs to be used in a more nuanced way. What is certain is that no book has had more influence on the life of the world or effected more change in individual human lives than this magnificent book, 'the most valuable thing that this world affords'.

But first we have to open it.

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