

I wonder, what is your favourite passage from the Bible? Maybe it is a story, like Joseph and his dreams, or Daniel in the lions' den, or the parable of the Good Samaritan, or the return of the Prodigal son, or Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead? Maybe it is just a verse from the Psalms or the Prophets.

If we make the time to read the Bible, we discover that God is talking to us, guiding us, teaching us, even challenging us. All because he loves us.

The Bible is God's love letter to you. So don't leave it on the shelf.

Today is Bible Sunday, so let us look at the Bible. The Christian Bible is a collection of 66 different books divided into two sections (Old and New Testaments) written by over 40 different authors, over a span of 1,500 years, in three different languages, yet it presents a unified message of God's plan and purpose for humanity. Thirty-nine books make up the Old Testament, which was written between around 1,500 BC and 400 BC, starting with the book of Genesis and ending with the book of Malachi. The Christian Old Testament and the Jewish Bible contain the same 39 books, though they're listed in different order.

The 27 books that make up the New Testament were written over a 50-year span, and they deal with Jesus Christ's birth, life, death, and resurrection, the beginning of the Christian church, and instruction about how to live as a follower of Jesus Christ. The Old Testament was written primarily in Hebrew, with a little Aramaic, and the New Testament was written exclusively in Greek. Yet these diverse authors, each in their own way, present a unified portrait of God's plans and purposes in our world.

The Bible was the first book ever printed on the printing press, it's the best-selling book of all time, and portions have been translated into over 1,900 different languages. However, there are over 7,000 languages in use in the world today!

Let's look at what the Bible says about itself.

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). These sacred writings are said to be "God breathed." - What makes these writings 'sacred writings'--is the fact that God breathed them out, that they have their ultimate origin with God himself.

The Bible provides us with the equipment we need for a spiritually vital life with God. Some people say that the word BIBLE stands for 'Best Instructions Before Leaving Earth.'

God can speak to us in different ways, for instance through dreams, or through other people, or through what we sometimes call 'coincidences,' but I prefer to call 'God-incidences.' However the main way that God speaks to us is through his Word, through the Bible.

Sadly, many Bibles are used as decorations, family heirlooms, or as a kind of good luck charm. Yet the Bible was meant to be an open book, a book with incredible relevance to the ordinary details of our daily lives. At times we have been guilty of taking the book and making it boring to people. I think it's a sin to bore people with the Bible. You see, we don't have to make the Bible relevant, it already is relevant, we just need to get out of the way and allow it to speak to our life situation.

Some people are sceptical, and they protest, "But everyone has their own interpretation of the Bible." This is true if we treat the Bible as an encyclopaedia of disconnected thoughts and ideas. It's easy to take one or two verses and make them say anything you want them to say. The classic example of this is the man who wanted to know God's will for his life, so he opened the Bible randomly and read the verse that says, "Judas went and hanged himself." Then he closed the Bible, and repeated the same procedure, and this time the Bible opened to a verse that said, "Now go and do likewise." If that's the way we treat the Bible, then everyone does have their own interpretation of what it says.

For 2000 years the Christian faith has affirmed that God has spoken through the Bible. Our role as readers then is to hear the message of the Bible, not to read into it what we think it ought to say, or to use isolated parts of the Bible to justify our own ideas. Whenever we try to read our own ideas into the Bible, we put ourselves in danger of missing God's voice and hearing our own voice instead.

Now there are lots of things that are true in life that the Bible doesn't tell us about. The Bible doesn't tell us how to change a flat tyre or how to cure measles; it doesn't tell us how to build a helicopter or how to master calculus. We know these other things through experience, reasoning, science, and so forth. So there are other sources of truth in the world, and let's face it, all truth is ultimately God's truth. The Bible's focus is telling us the truth we need in order to have a relationship with God and to understand God's purposes. This is truth we could never discover through science or experience. The Bible touches on areas of science and history, and when it does speak to these issues it does so truthfully, but it wasn't written to be a science book. Its purpose is to reveal truth about knowing God and God's ways.

Although the Bible reveals God's truth to us, its primary purpose is not merely to educate us. Look at Hebrews 4:12, "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (NIV).

Just as a caterpillar is transformed into a butterfly, God works through the Bible to transform us into fully devoted followers of Jesus who wholeheartedly love God and others.

You see, the Christian faith is not merely a set of ideas. Being a Christian is not just about spouting off doctrines or reciting creeds. Being a Christian is first and foremost about a personal loving relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. This loving relationship is a life transforming one, because a person can't encounter Jesus Christ without being radically changed. The Christian faith is about being transformed not merely about being informed. Once we enter into a relationship with God through Christ, the Bible is God's primary means of changing us. God certainly isn't limited to the Bible because he also changes us in worship, through suffering, through prayer and so forth. But the Bible is essential and central to our transformation into the image of Christ.

We are so blessed. There are so many different versions of the Bible available to us today. The words may be slightly different, but the message is the same. So find a version that suits you. You do not have to read, or listen to, a version that you cannot understand.

If you haven't got a Bible and you would like one, please speak to me today. I honestly believe that God wants every single one of us to come into a deeper relationship with him. One way that we can do that is if we read his word. So I will gladly give you a Bible if you haven't got one. Or maybe you could ask your family to buy you one for Christmas. It might be the best present you ever have.

But there is no point in having a Bible if you are not going to read it! Next year, in 2022, I plan to read the Bible in a year again. I hope that you will join me. There will be monthly print-outs available, with introductions to each book of the Bible and suggested daily readings. If you would like a copy, please contact Joanne in the Parish Office or speak to me.

The Bible is God's love letter to you. So don't leave it on the shelf, read it! Amen.