

The Church's prayer for this Sunday – Bible Sunday

Blessed Lord,
who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning:
Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them,
that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life,
which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ;
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Bible readings and reflection for Sunday 25th October 2020, Bible Sunday

Psalm 119: 9-16

⁹How can young people keep their way pure?
By guarding it according to your word.
¹⁰With my whole heart I seek you;
do not let me stray from your commandments.
¹¹I treasure your word in my heart,
so that I may not sin against you.
¹²Blessed are you, O Lord;
teach me your statutes.
¹³With my lips I declare
all the ordinances of your mouth.
¹⁴I delight in the way of your decrees
as much as in all riches.
¹⁵I will meditate on your precepts,
and fix my eyes on your ways.
¹⁶I will delight in your statutes;
I will not forget your word.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.

A reading from the New Testament: Colossians 3: 12-17

¹²As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all

wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Today's reading from the gospels: Matthew 24: 30-35

³⁰ Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see "the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven" with power and great glory. ³¹ And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

The Lesson of the Fig Tree

³² 'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ³³ So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁴ Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

A reflection for Bible Sunday from Revd Priscilla Slusar, interim lead minister for Haslingfield

What does the Bible mean to you? Is it a book on your bookshelf at home, or a digital version on your phone? Is it readings you hear in church on Sundays, or favourite passages you remember from childhood? Do you find the Bible comforting in times of crisis or challenging?

Today is Bible Sunday, when we reflect on the significance of the Bible in our lives as Christians and give thanks for it.

When I was a little girl (a long time ago!), my mother told me the story of Mary Jones and her bible. In the 1700s in Wales, Mary Jones, aged 10, began to save up for something very special. Mary was a good reader and often read a lesson in Chapel on Sundays, but her parents were too poor to own a bible - so Mary decided to buy one of her own. And, for 6 long years, she saved and worked hard; gardening, running errands, raising chickens and selling eggs, sewing and scrubbing floors.

Then, aged 16, Mary walked 25 miles through the Welsh countryside to Bala, to see Reverend Thomas Charles who sold bibles. Mary returned home triumphantly carrying her most treasured possession.

Because of her persistence and longing to possess her very own bible, Reverend Charles and other influential people set up the "British and Foreign Bible Society", which continues to distribute bibles throughout the world to people who would otherwise be unable to obtain one.

How would we feel if we were unable to access a bible, or if all the bibles in the world disappeared? What would be missing in our lives and in our worship?

Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." Jesus was, and is, a great communicator. By telling stories and asking questions, and challenging us, he translates a God beyond our understanding to a God close at hand. Through the words of Jesus, we are able to establish a relationship with God.

The Bible tells us stories of a very different time, place and culture. It is sometimes difficult to see the connection between these stories and our modern lives – but then we look more closely at the people involved in these stories. We are just the same as them; human characteristics do not really change over time. There are stories of love and hate, fear and jealousy, family tensions, political pressures, national disasters. These are all situations that we can identify with. "All human life is here" is a phrase that could be applied to the Bible.

What makes this collection of books different from other history books is that it tells the story of the relationship between God and God's people. And it is through reading and exploring these writings that we develop our relationship with God and our identity as Christians. God connects with us through the Bible.

Reading the Bible is not always a comfortable experience. There are times when the Bible challenges us. We may want guidance and comfort but instead find passages that are disturbing or confusing. For example: "I permit no woman to teach or have authority over men; she is to keep silent." If I took this verse from the first epistle of Timothy literally I would not be preaching to you now! At the end of a reading in church we often say "This is the word of the Lord" but is that appropriate in all cases? What about stories of terrible cruelty or the detailed dietary rules of an ancient group of people? In some churches, a different phrase has been used to address this issue – they say "For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God."

It is all too easy to gloss over the more challenging parts of the Bible; to go back to our favourite passages over and over again. It is reassuring to constantly read well-loved phrases and avoid the awkward bits. The Lectionary which sets out the prescribed texts for each day and each Sunday service ensures that we can't do that. We have to engage with the hard stuff – read it, analyse it, interrogate it, look for the meaning and relevance of the words. As we read the Bible, we have to ask the Holy Spirit to inspire our hearts and minds

so that we come to know God better and to recognise what God is saying to us, even when the context is difficult.

God's word to us is love. This is the key message of the Bible, embodied in Jesus: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not die but may have eternal life." Jesus lived, died and rose from the dead so that the love of God could become real for everyone. Jesus teaches us the ultimate lesson of God's love. The Bible gives us this message of love and leads us to God. The written word leads us to the living Word – as St John puts it, "The Word became flesh and lived among us."

"Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will not pass away." Bibles are precious; inspired but perishable, just as we are. They will crumble into dust, but the word of God is everlasting, and Jesus is the living Word of God.

Amen.