

24th October 2010 – Bible Sunday

Light and Truth

Readings John 5: 36b-47

Luke 4:16-24 (Tyndale translation)

Today is Bible Sunday and in our Gospel reading we have Luke's account of how Jesus began his ministry

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom, and stood up to read, from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah:- "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." Then he said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus started in the place where he been brought up and we are reminded that our ministry starts where we are, He turns immediately to the scriptures and this is where our witness, too, must start. And his message is not of condemnation but of encouragement – good news to the poor, release to captives, sight to the blind freedom to the oppressed; and it is to be applied not only to physical conditions but to spiritual conditions.

Our task then, is to open up the scriptures and to bring good news.

Next spring we shall be celebrating the 400th anniversary of the Authorised Version which in the year 1611 was appointed to be read in churches throughout the land, and I want to look at

How did it all begin?

How did we reach where we are today?

Where do we go from here?

The three parish churches of our benefice are all over of 900 years old and so for almost half of their existence the bible was literally a closed book. Services were conducted in Latin and the bible was read in Latin. Just what the ordinary people of our villages made of it I don't know – presumably there was some sort of homily in delivered English delivered by the priest, but the rest of the service must have been a mystery.

500 years ago things began to change. The Roman Catholic Church had become more and more obsessed with political power and material prosperity. Like the Pharisees in the time of Jesus they became obsessed with trivial details of worship and Church organisation, and people began to call for the church to be reformed.

Bible scholars came to realise that many of the teachings of the church bore little resemblance to the teaching of Jesus as found in the bible and felt that the only remedy was to ensure that the Bible became available in English. It is of course true that in those days few people could read for themselves, but they could at least have it read to them and the recent invention of the printing press made the large scale production of bibles a practical possibility. But the use of the Bible in English was against the law.

One of the early translators was William Tyndale, and it was his translation that I used for the Gospel reading this morning. He tried to get permission to translate the Bible in England, but permission was refused and he moved to the continent, where the influence of Martin Luther made bible translation possible. Rather than translating from the Latin bible used in the church, Tyndale went back to the original Greek and Hebrew manuscripts and his translations soon got him into trouble because they contradicted church doctrine. To take just two examples

You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church. Because Peter was the first head of the church in Rome this saying had become the justification of the supremacy of the Roman Catholic Church and all its hierarchy and organisation. Tyndale's translation read "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my congregation" widening God's influence to include all those who followed Christ.

And it is Tyndale who for the first time in 1 Corinthians 13, for the word Charity, with its emphasis on doing good deeds, substitutes Love, which is the very nature of God.

The reaction of the Church was so violent that Tyndale was eventually burnt as a heretic in the year 1536. But by this time he had already completed his translation of the New Testament and almost half of the Old Testament.

It is ironic that within a very few years of Tyndale's execution Henry VIII made the use of the English bible legal And when, 70 years later, King James appointed a group of experts to produce an authorised version of the bible for official use, between 80 and 90 percent of Tyndale's translation was included and his work lives on.

Shortly after the publication of the Authorised Version, the Pilgrim Fathers set out for America seeking Freedom and their Pastor, John Robinson wrote to them, "The Lord hath yet more Light and Truth to break forth from his Holy Word."

That new light and truth has broken forth in many different ways. For almost 200 years the Authorised Version stood alone in the English speaking world - it was simply - "The Bible". Then, at the beginning of the 19th century, the great missionary movements sprang up to carry God's word to other peoples and the bible began to be translated into other languages so that more and more men and women could hear God's word in their own language and that process is still going on.

And, because language is a living thing, eventually the need arose for modern language versions of the English bible and especially in the last 50 years more and more translations have been produced to bring God's word to today's generation in language they can understand.

Special mention should also be made of the Gideons society who for many years have worked to make God's word available by distributing copies of the bible in hotel rooms and schools

So where do we go from here?

One of the objectives of Bible Sunday is to encourage each of us to read our bible and apply its teaching to our daily lives.

This can be done in a number of ways.

Firstly there are bible notes available which provide a bible passage for each day with an explanation, a comment or a prayer to help us understand and apply it. Each of you will have been given a mini-study of this week's gospel reading as a kind of starter pack. Could I suggest that you use it in the course of this week to gain new light from this piece of scripture?

A number of us already subscribe to the daily readings published by the Bible Reading Fellowship which we find very helpful and invite you to join us. The supply of booklets is organised by Wendy Mellor and you will also have a leaflet about this. Wendy has also obtained some back-numbers of the booklets which are available for you to look at in Church.

But in a detailed verse-by-verse study it is easy to become immersed in minute detail and lose sight of the big picture. So, a second way of approaching the Bible is what might be called bulk reading – that is to read long passages so that the story which the bible is telling becomes clear. As a starter, why not sit down and read one of the gospels, say Mark or Luke, from beginning to end and see what you get from it. It could easily be done in a single evening. A couple of years ago some of us set out to read the whole Bible in a year and there are available reading schemes for this kind of study.

Thirdly there are Bible study groups in which people meet together to read the bible and share their experiences. The one to which I belong has been existence for over 20 years, with an average membership of 10 or 12, although I calculated the other day that between 40 and 50 people have been members at one time or another. We have used all kinds of material to guide our studies and the emphasis has been not so much on teaching and learning, but on sharing and we have found a true fellowship together.

Finally I would urge you after the service to look at the array of books obtained by Jan Thompson on all aspects of bible study which are available for sale. I am sure you will find something there which will help you to take the next step on the way of faith.

I want to finish with a verse from a hymn which I used to sing many years ago, which echoes those words of John Robinson

We limit not the truth of God to our poor reach of mind

By notions of our day and sect, crude, partial and confined:

No, let a new and better hope within our hearts be stirred

The lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his word.

Let us pray:

Lord, open your word to us and bring us the freedom it offers; in Jesus' name
Amen