

Sermon for Bible Sunday Oct 18th 2020

May I speak and may we all hear in the name of the living God, God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

As I wrestled and tried to pray about today's sermon for this Bible Sunday 2020, with its rich variety of set readings, I had an earworm that simply wouldn't go away. A little old Sunday school ditty I must have learned well over seventy years ago. If you know it, feel free to mumble it along with me, but very quietly, in your masks!

*Sing: Wide wide as the ocean, high as the heavens above
Deep deep as the deepest sea is my saviour's love.
I though so unworthy still am a child in his care,
For his book teaches me that his love reaches me everywhere..*

“for his book teaches me that his LOVE reaches me--- EVERYWHERE..” It says it all doesn't it. Such a simple overriding message from such a complex library of holy writings, writings stretching over thousands of years, all collected together in one great volume- -the volume that still sells more copies than any other- -the volume that's been translated into nearly every language across the globe.

The more we read and study these writings the deeper we'll go in our faith, the more we'll understand about the global reach of the love of God- -.and how very much we need to remember that as we struggle with life in this time of global pandemic. We're very blessed to have so many Bible study aids on so many levels to help us to understand what we're reading- -the cultural back grounds, what's history, what's poetry and imagery, what's story. But it can all seem a bit bewildering. If you feel like that, remember the core message and be encouraged to go further: “For his book teaches me that his love reaches me, EVERYWHERE” .

Today's Old Testament reading takes place after the return of the Jews from Babylon. Almost the whole of the nation had been taken

there into exile as prisoners and they'd suffered there for many many years, often feeling lost and abandoned . On their return, their Holy Book of God's law is read aloud publicly and explained to the gathered community. It's a very long session with an amazingly powerful effect. First of all the people are moved with deep sorrow. They weep because they realize how they've brought their disaster on themselves. They've neglected God and broken his laws. But they're told to stop weeping and rejoice, actually rejoice because God has not abandoned them. His loving care is even greater than their sin! This day is to be a holy day of celebration! They're to go out and feast, and take helpings from their bounty to those in need.

The second reading is from a letter to the new Christians in the Greek city of Colossae. It might have been from Paul or some other apostle—the scholars are still out on that, but it really doesn't matter. These Colossians had come to believe and trust in Jesus through the preaching of the apostles, who were travelling far and wide with the good news of his life, death and resurrection. They were a mixed community of both Jews and Gentiles, so inevitably there were disputes and differences to be resolved because of their different backgrounds and ways of thinking. This letter tackles some of these disputes head on. The little section appointed for today puts the essentials of the Christian life in a nutshell. If we behaved exactly as the writer here recommends, how wonderful the church would be! How effective would be our witness in the world! Notice the emphasis on dwelling on the word of God in Christ. They didn't have the New Testament as we have it of course- -not yet! They were the ones living out the earliest times of faith in Jesus before the Gospels had been written down. Letters were being written by the apostles and carefully treasured and copied but nothing had been put together and authorized by the church as we have it today. Their scriptures were still the books of the Old Testament. Sometimes Christians fall into the trap of thinking that the only bit of the Bible that matters is the New Testament.

And of course the New Testament is absolutely crucial. I wouldn't for one minute suggest otherwise. Now that we have the great advantage

of having the Gospel writings and the letters to the early church written down, that's the obvious place to start an exploration of the Bible. We've got much more to help us in our search for the truth than the early church had, but we can't stop there. The complete scriptures cover the immense sweep of the history of God's gradual revelation of himself through the Jews; and come to a great climax in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus himself was steeped in the Old Testament scriptures and proclaimed that he had come to fulfill them.

Usually we base our sermons mainly on the Gospel reading, but today's snippet from St Matthew would need more time than we have here to put it into context and unpack its complexities, so I'll simply highlight the last sentence where Jesus says, heaven and earth will pass away but my words will never pass away. The words of Jesus are the words of life, the pinnacle of all the writings- -the jewel in the crown.

In his letter to the infant church in Rome Paul writes: "For **everything** that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope."

Some people think the **Christian** hope is just wishful thinking- -pie in the sky when you die- -pull the other leg, this one's got bells on! But they're wrong! The Christian hope is the surest hope there is. Whatever life might throw at us, including this awful time of global pandemic, our hope in Christ is based on solid ground, recorded for us in the Holy scriptures.

So just how much do we, you and I here today, treasure the holy scriptures and allow them to teach and encourage **us and strengthen our hope?**

Bible Sunday's a good day to take stock. Does your Bible study routine maybe need a fresh look, or even a kick-start? Do you need a new Bible or an extra one in a fresh translation, some Bible reading notes or one of the apps you can get on your

computer or your phone? Maybe If you feel confident enough, you might take a trip wearing your mask to the Way Inn Christian bookshop in Berkhamsted, or have a browse online. It's a personal thing, but it's good to talk about it as well. Ask for help from Mike or Ruth or me if you need it. Ask some of your Christian friends how they're doing with their Bible reading. They might have some good ideas that will help you, or they might be very challenged by the question.

When my late husband John was alive we read the Bible in bed every morning with our morning tea and then prayed together before getting up. Sometimes we read through a Gospel, bit by bit day by day, or some other Bible book; sometimes we used the lectionary or a psalm. That was a wonderful start to the day and it was a fantastic routine. For a long time after his death I was totally at sea, but I had his treasured bible always beside my chair to dip into. I still have. At the moment I'm using an app on my ipad called lectio, recommended by a friend. I totally need a frame work to keep me going and from time to time I realize I've lapsed again, so I need to make yet another fresh start.

But, wherever you are on your faith journey, hang on to that little ditty- -"For his book teaches me that his LOVE reaches me, EVERYWHERE.

Amen.

Carole Lewis