

### The book that reads you

600 years ago when the bible was only then being printed in English, Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, composed a prayer in which he asked God to help us to ‘read, mark and inwardly digest’ the scriptures; so we call today Bible Sunday.

Good morning.

Now! The famous humourist author of the Jeeves novels, PG Wodehouse, once received a letter taking exception to an article that said Wodehouse was a better writer than Shakespeare; the letter-writer thought Shakespeare was a genius to be compared with Drake and Nelson. Wodehouse replied that he was not familiar with the writings of either Drake or Nelson. The correspondence ended with another letter from someone writing from India telling of a cow that had entered his bungalow and ate his copy of ‘Carry on Jeeves’ but left on a bookshelf works by Jane Austen and T. S. Eliot. The cow had clearly discovered one way, not to be recommended, of ‘inwardly digesting’.

There are, I am *sad* to say, some equivalent spiritual digestive practices; chief among them is to read the Bible as if each word has such a timeless truth that it *dictates* what a person should think or do. The better truth, is that the words and the images come to us through the specific lives and circumstances of those who lived and wrote in their own times; the specific history and culture; the specific geography, economics and agriculture; to say nothing of the particular events over the many centuries. None of these was ignored by God when God took the initiative to win a faithful people; in the *word* made flesh; or the Light to lighten the Gentiles; that is in the birth of Jesus. (The technical term for this is Incarnation which you will hear more of at Christmas.)

Copies of the Bible should perhaps carry a warning - this book can damage you and this book can transform you. The consequences of treating Scripture as though the personality of the writer and the times it was written made no difference, have, in the story of the Christian Church been, to put it simply, horrendous, catastrophic even devastating.

Happily most Christians reject the idea that God dictated the Bible in some mysterious way; that simply does not stand up to investigation; unhappily a few still use Scripture as though this is the way it ought to be. What the Bible shows us, is the *work of God* in, and through, a particular people. Even when they prayed that God would tear down the heavens and come down, the God of the Bible, draws them into a deeper understanding of what the *miracle of life* is really about, when it is lived as if it is in God’s kingdom.

In the very earliest of days, long before anything was ever written down, almost before ‘once-upon-a-time’, the people, who in due time looked to Abraham as the founder of their tribe, would not even speak the name of God. Scripture, is the consequence, of that long process of learning the *name* and the *nature* of God; such understanding transforms perhaps for each generation whenever you ask the ancient question - who am I? Who are we?

20 years since the beginning of the new millennium there is talk of the end of the age; born perhaps, with the collapse of optimism that humankind is in control. There is uneasiness and fear when we seek shelter in the middle of storm and tempest, caught between COVID-19 and Climate Change. Take heart, for the restless search for meaning is God given; you *will* find God in the storm; God is that still-small-voice of hope.

The Revd. Augustus Toplady, knew this 260 years ago, sheltering in a terrible storm as he travelled down Cheddar Gorge. Straight away he wrote the hymn ‘Rock of ages, cleft for me; let me hide myself in thee.’ In 1992, Terry Waite, was released from being hostage for 5 years in Lebanon, knew darkness. He would recite a prayer he learnt as a choir boy, ‘Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord; and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night.’ ‘That is very, very meaningful’, he said’ when you’re sitting in darkness. That [prayer] not only has meaning, but it also has poetry and rhythm. There is a relationship between identity, language and prayer; somehow they help you hold together at your centre. (Hope1032 Radio broadcast, April 2013).

We are in troubled years; more troubled than Toplady’s day with the French Revolution looming? More troubled than acts of terrorism backed by nation states? I do not know. What I do believe, is that we reap a whirlwind if we are a people who forgets God.

I therefore think I understand St Paul (the great letter writer of Christian Scripture), his pleading: ‘Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect’ (Romans 12.2).

A remarkable feature is that through the centuries, surviving many translations, the Bible’s text has remained the same; what has changed, is the lens, through which you read what it says and interpret it.

Take this example: few, if any, I hope, will read scripture with regard to race as it was read right into the last century, in this country, in South Africa, in the United States. Racial theories based on the tortured inheritance of the sons of Noah, have, thank God, no place today; they are transformed by the ‘renewing of your mind’, I quoted a moment ago. This is the very St Paul, acceptor of slavery, seen now by the same people, as an apostle of liberation.

What can be lost is moral imagination just as, in our generation, religious imagination is in short supply. Moral imagination helps you translate St Paul’s images into the world you find yourself in now. That is nothing less than the work of the Holy Spirit. Small wonder the Book of the Hebrews describes scripture as ‘sharper than any two-edged sword.’ In fact, when you read the whole verse in Hebrews (it is chapter 4, verse 12) you become very clear about how transforming Scripture is.

There is the story of an East African village woman who used to walk around always carrying her Bible. “Why always the Bible?” her neighbours asked teasingly. “There are so many other books you could read.” The woman knelt down, held the Bible high above her head and said, “Yes, of course there are many books which I could read. But there is only one book which reads me.” The mystery of reading the Bible - reading Holy Scripture - is that a reversal of roles takes place the more you read it. You start out being the subject; the biblical messages in whatever form they reach you, are the object of your reading. Then suddenly you may become aware that behind and

through the stories, texts and visualised messages stands someone who looks at you, speaks to you; gives you guidance. The object of your enquiry becomes the subject, who addresses you, and understands you better than you do yourself. You are confronted with the living God, who acts in Creation, throughout history, in your personal life and in the world of nations.

As you read there may be confusion and fear; you are not separate from it. When you tell the story of Christmas; this year, tell it differently. *You are the story and God is with you.* I tell you as plainly as I can that if the story is not about Emanuel (that word means 'God with us') Emanuel now, then we *are* lost. It is in the lostness; in the darkness; it is in the tempest; it is into the whirlwind; God speaks his Word; and a light shines.

Know the generosity of God's love; it is always there; listen, listen to God's song. The world fears silence not darkness; it fears the silence of death and nothingness; it prefers darkness to light. Scripture tells that truth.

How do you measure Scripture? Look at the consequences. Let your soul speak with the Lord and listen; be the Gospel and bring that good news to those you know, those you meet; in your heart know the glory of what can be; let your life reflect the same love which sent Jesus among us; then you can walk steadily, and with courage, towards the horizon of hope. Sharing that hope, that peace, with a deeply troubled world.

Thank you for listening

## **Prayer**

Let us pray

Day by day, Lord.  
Day by day.  
Oh, dear Lord,  
three things I pray:  
to hear you more clearly,  
love you more dearly,  
follow you more nearly,  
day by day.  
Amen.