

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Last Sunday after Trinity - Bible Sunday**

**24<sup>th</sup> October 2021**

**Sermon – Aix-en-Provence**

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On Bible Sunday, many churches join in celebrating God's word in the Scriptures, giving thanks for the Bible in our lives and in the life of our communities, and committing to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the Scriptures. Year after year, I feel moved to renew this commitment and, at the same time, I ponder how to inspire people around me to have a deeper engagement with the Bible. It sometimes brings to my mind a conversation I had years ago, when I was asked what I thought about biblical authority.

The word 'authority' doesn't sit very well with my generation. And even less with the younger generation. For many people, the word carries negative connotations; worse, for some, because of their personal experiences, it chimes with a claim to the right to rule and command, with power to enforce obedience, with submission, even with injustice or discrimination.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when we put our trust in science and technology, because of their claim to offer tangible certainties, answers to important questions, solutions for problems, promises of longer and happier life, who would still think of the Scriptures as having a directive and operative voice in our lives? How many are those, in Western Societies, who turn to the Bible as a source of hope and encouragement, so that they may live?

Thus, to make the aforementioned conversation possible, I shied away from ascribing authority to the Bible and tried to offer two other paradigms: the Bible as a territory, and the Bible as a conversation.

“The Bible is the territory in which Christians expect to hear God speaking”, says Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury (*Being Christian*).

A territory so vast, that its exploration can never end. But it’s also a territory that has depths to descend into, and heights to be scaled. The most obvious paths to be followed can prove to be a labyrinth. The dark, endless passages can suddenly open to embrace a breath-taking view.

And while wandering across this territory, one explores the landscape of one’s own soul, with its abyss of fears, inconsistencies and contradictions, and its peaks of hopes and dreams and longing for eternity.

“In these books we may learn [to know God, but also] to know ourselves”, we can read in a 16<sup>th</sup> century *Exhortation to the Preaching and the Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures* attributed to Archbishop Thomas Cranmer.

So the Bible is also a territory in which to dwell confidently as a disciple, that is, as a learner.

What does this confidence mean? The belief that the biblical texts can yield an answer to any question and a solution to all life’s situations, that they can be straightforwardly normative, may be rooted in an assumption that one owns the key to reading the Bible and to discerning God’s mind.

Not only is the Bible one of the most pluralistic texts, but you will agree with me that God’s mind is infinite. I would, therefore, plead for a confidence that means trusting God to be at work in the process of reading and interpreting. Such a confidence requires one to avoid exercising dominance over the text, to be open to the Word, and to allow it to enter and operate into one’s life.

It requires one to see the Bible as a conversation.

“The Bible isn’t a book to read and put down”, explained the former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, because “it’s God’s invitation to join the conversation between heaven and earth, that never ceases.”

It’s a conversation about the inspiring ways of God with us, across time and history. It’s a conversation in which I let God address me as ‘you’, and I feel moved to address God in response. I come with my own questions, and the Scriptures raise questions in me.

Nevertheless, this is not going to be a smooth conversation. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.” (Isaiah 55.8) As we read a couple of weeks ago, in the Letter to the Hebrews, God’s Word can be very disruptive, piercing the readers or the listeners, laying them bare before their own eyes and “to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account” (*Hebrews 4.12*). There is purpose in the Word of God! Let’s not shy away from engaging with its transformative power.

There is much to learn from Jews who “don’t [just] read the Scriptures, but argue with them, wrestle with them, listen to them, and turn them inside out to find a new insight they have missed before” (Jonathan Sacks). It means reading the Scriptures with both heart and head.

Anglicanism is hospitable to a particularly rich approach to the Bible. Biblical language and imagery are interwoven throughout the liturgy, as well as in our hymns. The Anglican church has a long tradition of encouraging people to open the Bible not only for worship but also to interpret it. Reason and tradition can and should be invited to assist this interpretation.

The Bible is a territory to explore and in which to make one’s dwelling as a disciple and where one can engage in transformative conversation. So, the Bible has authority.

The Latin word *auctoritas*, which becomes *authority* in English, comes from the verb *augeo*, which means to bring into existence, to increase, to perform a creative, founding act. Thus, the authoritative person or entity is a founder of something unheard of, of something extraordinarily new.

Let’s read again the last verses from Isaiah: “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, [...] so shall my word [...] not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” (Isaiah 55.10-11) God’s authority vested in Scripture is designed to bring new and abundant life, to liberate human beings, to set them free to be fully human.

“The Word of God is living and acting” (*Hebrews 4.12*). The force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the church, the strength and faith for each of us, food for the soul, an everlasting source of

spiritual life. We are called to sit under this transformative power of the Scriptures, so that we learn how to live as the people of God for the world, conformed to the heart of God.

“Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.” (Isaiah 55.6)

Amen.