

Sermon Notes - Why I Read the Bible (SC)
29th January 2023

Reading: 2 Timothy 3:1 – 17

Chatham Dockyard is home to one of Europe's longest buildings. The rope making yard stands at a quarter mile in length and has manufactured line and cable for over 400 years. I remember seeing a local news piece celebrating the career of someone who had worked there, man and boy, from 16 to 65. And through the years he made notes in a large book, documenting all he had learnt – all the techniques, quirks, and tricks of the trade. Such that, by the time he retired the book was a very precious and substantial document that he nicknamed his *Rope Maker's Bible*. Upon his retirement, he handed over the book to the rest of the team. What they received from him was something special: an authoritative text, something that was reliable, that could be trusted, something that would equip craftsmen in the coming generation, something that connected them to a living tradition. But for the team, it was more than just a reference book, because the personality of their colleague shone through on every page.

Now with that in mind, today, we continue our sermon series where we reflect on the practices and traditions of the church, where we ask, "Why do we do what we do?" And this series has a twofold purpose. First of all, it helps us to reimagine church from the perspective of someone who perhaps feels on the outside of things. It is important we nurture this sense of empathy. Second, it is an opportunity for us to reconnect with church life, to shake off any sense of going through the motions, and to consciously consider and critique the patterns of worship we have inherited today. And while it is not quite the rope-maker's Bible, this morning we are considering *The Bible*, the Holy Scriptures. What makes *this* for us, an authoritative, trustworthy text, which equips us for the life of faith, and connects us to a living tradition. *Why do we preach the Bible?*

And I want to begin today from a place of scepticism. I want to embrace doubt. I want to share two contrasting experiences. One of going to the gym, and the other of a friend in grief, because between the two settings we see some of the common attitudes toward the Bible.

Now at the gym, I think precisely because it's not the church building, and I'm not in clerical wear, the questions I get asked are remarkably honest and to the point. And one day I was asked a question about the Bible. I was asked, "How can the Bible be relevant? It's so old!" Here then is a feeling that the Bible is somehow disconnected from current human experience, out of touch with society, irrelevant to our own time and context. Perhaps you have come across a similar argument or have asked the same question yourself? Here then is a point of view that wonders about how the Bible can still be relevant.

And I want to contrast that attitude now, with another experience where a friend of mine, who was trying to console someone close to them in a time of grief, asked me, "Is there anything I can say? Is there a quote from the Bible I can offer?" Here then is another common feeling, which is happy to turn to the Bible in moments of crisis. There is an almost semi-mystical view of the Bible, or a culturally sympathetic view, that acknowledges that the Bible can be comforting in life's more chaotic moments. There is here, a longing for a deeper more ancient wisdom than our own individual sentiments, a desire to speak into grief ancient words of hope.

And I think that for many people, our view of Scripture swings, like a pendulum between these two poles. The Scriptures are irrelevant for everyday life, but a short quote during a crisis can be comforting. Maybe you've encountered this too. Maybe this describes your point of view?

Now, I don't want to undermine the sincerity, or the genuine way in which the questions were put to me. But, surely we must agree that a Christian view of the Bible must be more robust than this. Or at least, a convincing Christian account of the Bible must engage with these points of view.

And what I would say is this. One of the great joys of the Christian life, is that we get to read the Bible as a community. In that sense it's a public document, no one person owns it. It's there in the public domain to be critiqued, to be challenged, to be engaged with. In that sense, reading the Bible has always been a shared discipline. And one of the privileges I have had in recent years is reading the Bible with people who are exploring questions of faith. And in so doing, one of the things I have re-discovered with their help, is just how good the Bible is at documenting the complexities of human nature. I have rediscovered how good the Bible is at speaking into and commenting on the human condition. In the stories of the Bible, we see all human experience taken up and dissected. The Bible makes sense of the world around me, precisely because it is realistic about what it means to be human, and because it speaks of real change, real hope in Jesus Christ.

How is the Bible relevant today? – because its diagnosis of the human condition makes sense of all that I see in the world around me.

But what about this second attitude? Which turns to the Bible in a time of crisis. Well of course that's no bad thing at all. But the more I have read the Bible, not just in community, but now speaking as an individual, the more I see that it is concerned with all of life. Now don't get me wrong, when someone puts me on the spot and says Simon, 'give me a quote for this situation', or 'give me a quote for someone going this or that' I can get flummoxed too. But what I see in the Scriptures is a depth of wisdom, greater than my own musings or sentiments, that speak into all spheres of life, not just life in its most extreme moments.

So not only is the Bible not just a diagnosis, but a prognosis, it is not just an observation of human nature, but is concerned with what it means to live well. The Bible tells me something profound about what it means to be human, what it means to live well, and here we come to the fundamental point, it does so because I believe them to be God's words.

If you ask me why I read the Bible, as part of a community, or as an individual, the simplest answer I can give you is, "because I expect it to tell me something about God." That, I am afraid is the extent of my theological insight this morning. Why do I read the Bible? - because it tells me something about God. So, I believe that the Bible is authoritative and trustworthy, I believe it connects us to a living tradition and a community of faith, it equips us to live well, precisely because these are God's words.

This is what St Paul means in our reading when he instructs his student Timothy, "all Scripture is God-breathed." That is to say, the Bible as a whole, has the unique distinction of being inspired by the Holy Spirit, and yet shared with human authors who wrote them down.

And this I think is the critical question for those who wish to take the Bible seriously today. We cannot avoid the question at the heart of our reading. Do I believe that these are God's words? Do I believe this text is God-breathed?

So, why do I read the Bible?

Because its insight into human nature is still relevant.

Because it is interested in all of life, not just crisis.

Because it tells me something about God.