**Bible Sunday 2021**

One morning in the year 1800, a 15 year old Welsh girl set out on a 26 mile walk barefoot over the mountains from her tiny village of Llanfihangel, over Cader Idris to the town of Bala. She did not notice the rough stones digging into her feet for there was joy in her heart because, after 6 long years of working and saving, she had scraped up enough money to buy a Welsh Bible. But her joy turned to despair, when Thomas Charles told her that he had no Bible to give her and she collapsed in tears on his doorstep. You all know who she was, don’t you???? Mary Jones. But her story does not end there, for Thomas Charles was so moved by her grief and great need that he gave her a Bible reserved for someone else. Mary went home rejoicing; but Mr. Charles went to London and brought together a group which became the Bible Society, dedicated to translating and providing Bibles for people throughout the world. His stone memorial is in our own Worcester Cathedral, but this work is his true memorial.

I have a question for you….Do you love and treasure the Bible as much as Mary did? Would you have walked 26 miles barefoot?

To many people, the Bible is the most precious thing in the world, a source of inspiration, truth, hope and love. In its pages we learn of the love of God for our world and for us. We treasure the Parable of the Lost Son and are comforted by the image of the Good Shepherd in Psalm 23 and John’s Gospel because we see how it relates to ourselves and our needs and fears. As children, we revelled in the stories of David and Goliath, Daniel in the lions’ den and the exploits of Moses. As adults, going through trying times, we find comfort in the Psalms, identifying with those who cry out to God for comfort, protection or forgiveness. These psalms show us that it is O.K. to feel anger or frustration towards God because he will not punish us, but listen with compassion.

Without the Bible, we would have no extended record of the life and teaching of Jesus. Thanks to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, we probably know more about the life and teaching of a great religious leader than any other religious leader, like Mohammed or the Buddha. Enough of Jesus’ words have been recorded for us to try to model our lives on his teaching.

The wonderful thing about the Bible is that it purports to be the word of God – God speaking to us through the centuries. God has needed to channel his messages through chosen human beings, but thanks to the devoted work of historians, scribes, monks and those who invented the printing press, these messages and the teaching of Jesus have been preserved for mankind over hundreds, even thousands, of years.

The special nature of God’s word is seen In Isaiah 55:10-11. “For as the rain and snow come down from heaven and return not thither, but water the earth….so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it.” God’s words have a life of their own. So, throughout the Bible we see God keeping his promises, sometimes in the short term, sometimes hundreds of years later. Read Psalm 22 and see how easy it was for the early Christians to see there aspects of the death of Jesus or to link the Servant Songs of Second Isaiah with a suffering Messiah. Some prophecies are fulfilled more than once, like the return of the Jews to Jerusalem in 538 BC and again in AD 1948.

But the Bible is also dangerous. Over the centuries to today, reading, translating, printing, distributing or even preaching from the Bible could lead to someone’s death. The OT was originally in Hebrew and later translated also into Greek. The NT was in Greek. The first attempt to translate the Bible into English was made by John Wyclif in the fourteenth century, but the Lollards who read this Bible were persecuted. Wyclif had to rely on French or Latin translations and it was not until the sixteenth century and the invention of the Gutenberg printing press, that the Hebrew and Greek texts became available, so that John Tyndale was able to translate parts of these into English and distribute several thousand copies around England. Rogers and Coverdale produced Matthew’s Bible in 1537 and the folio edition, known as the Great Bible was given the royal licence and distributed to every church, where it was chained to the pulpit. For the first time, even the illiterate could hear the Word of God in plain English. The Geneva Bible followed in 1560 and is quoted from or alluded to hundreds of times by Shakespeare. In 1611, the King James’ Bible or Authorised Version, became the standard text until the twentieth century.

Allowing ordinary people access to the Bible changed church life for ever. Previously, the priests could teach the people only what they wanted them to know. Scripture could be edited to mould people and keep the people under the thumb of the church, especially by making them behave for fear of hell and damnation. It was the indulgences scandal that led to the intervention of Martin Luther and the Reformation. People could now read the Bible and find out the truth for themselves. But this is also dangerous. Many people do not realise that the Bible was constructed from many different texts. The OT text originally had no vowel sounds and the reader would add these from memory as he read. However, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls actually revealed that the OT texts had been handed down as faithfully as possible. There are several Greek texts of the NT, but the Greek was all in capital letters and had no punctuation. Think for a moment of the difference in meaning between “God was, in Christ, reconciling the world to himself” and “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” I Cor. 5:19. The first suggests that it was through the work of Christ; whereas the one with no punctuation suggests the divinity of Christ.

The Bible pictures people from 4,000-2,000 years ago whose lives and beliefs were very different from ours, so it is not always easy to relate to their point of view. So it is very dangerous to take everything in the Bible literally. Above all, it is dangerous to use texts out of context. Some preachers pick out a text and hammer it home without any reference to its context in Scripture or to its original meaning. I expect the text we are all aware of for its constant misuse by the JWs is the one from the Genesis 9:4 which says, “You shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.” This really refers to Jewish food laws and is linked with a prohibition against murder two verses later. The Jews and later, Muslims, took this to mean that blood should be drained from animals used for food because, for both of them, blood symbolises life, which only God can give and so only God should take away. As you know, JWs link this to blood transfusion and many lives have been lost unnecessarily when patients have bled to death.

So my plea to you this morning is to love and study your Bible, but do it intelligently using all the wonderful resources at our disposal. Do you read your Bible every day? It is the first thing I do when I get up in the morning, but I always read it with study notes.

Daily Bible reading notes nourish and inspire us on good days, but they really come into their own when we are flagging or dispirited. They provide a structure, a manageable passage of Scripture and the thoughts of a wise, compassionate and experienced commentator. What may have started as a chore becomes a welcome oasis of calm and encouragement.

There are many types of these around but today I have brought a sample of some for you to look at, produced by the Bible Reading Fellowship. These are produced every four months and vary from ones with a devotional emphasis, to scholarly ones used by Pam and myself. Please look at them. They are very reasonable, being about £15 for the whole year. I can order them for you.

**Let us end with a prayer:**

Almighty God, We thank you for the gift of your Holy Word.

May it be a lantern to our feet,

A light to our paths, and a strength to our lives.

Take us and use us to love and serve all people in the power of the Holy Spirit, in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour, Amen.