**#33 Bible Sunday 24 October 2021**

**2 Tim 3:14 – 4:5**

**14**But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, **15**and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. **16**All scripture is inspired by God and is[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2+Timothy+3%3A14-4%3A5&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-29853a)] useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, **17**so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

**4**In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: **2**proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. **3**For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, **4**and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. **5**As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

**John 5:36b – 47**

**36**But I have a testimony greater than John’s. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me. **37**And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form, **38**and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent.

**39**“You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. **40**Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. **41**I do not accept glory from human beings. **42**But I know that you do not have the love of God in[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+5%3A36b+-+47&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-26242a)] you. **43**I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not accept me; if another comes in his own name, you will accept him. **44**How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God? **45**Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope. **46**If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. **47**But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?”

In thinking about the Bible, for Bible Sunday, an image came to mind, which takes me back to a sitcom in the 1970s, possibly *Sykes* – do you remember that show? A moment when, *I think*, Corky, the policeman, responded to Eric’s claim about how religious he was by saying ‘*You* never read the Bible. But then, who does?’

Well, we do!

But what is it that *makes* a *good book,* generally*,* for you? Is it the plot, the excitement of the narrative, the characters, the beauty of the writing and the images? Do you prefer books that are definitely ‘true’ or do you like fiction?

What happens when we have a book that seems to be both, like our Bible?

Some books stay with us forever, we might re-read our favourites, and are sometimes disappointed when we see that they (or we) have changed when we revisit them. Its sometimes really difficult to recapture that first experience of reading a much-loved story.

I sometimes find it difficult to maintain that *first-reading* feeling of the Bible. Do some bits of the Bible become *too* familiar? Or is it frustrating that, for some parts of the Bible, we read and re-read it but can never quite understand what it says; what we’re being asked to do, or to be, and how. That’s certainly the case for me – I wrestle with the Bible almost as much as I love it; some parts, like some of Paul’s letters, I find much speak to me much more clearly that others, and I suspect you all find the same.

I think both readings we have heard today are pretty knotty ones – full of difficulties in interpretation and understanding. What do we do with passages like the reading from John we heard Jan read for us? “**41**I do not accept glory from human beings.” In which case, what are we doing here? Whilst we can love The Bible as our book of wisdom and guidance, some of the actual words are really difficult to understand, and certainly difficult to live by.

What I’ve just done, in plucking a single line from a reading, is the worst way to try to understand. Help is at hand though; we have each other. Like any good community, the Bible, a community of scripture, is read by communities of people. We gain some understanding by discussing the scriptures together. Also, some knowledge of the original contexts may shed light on each other. You can buy a book called ‘Gospel Parallels’, where the same story about Jesus in different Gospels are arranged alongside each other, so that you can see how the stories are told differently; in that way you can piece together a composite picture in an attempt for understanding; sometimes understanding comes, and sometimes, it doesn’t. But what discussion does is that it draws us together in the search for understanding how we might live as disciples of Christ.

I’m going to tell you some facts about the Bible. Put your thumbs up if you already knew the fact. Thumbs down if you didn’t know it.

The Bible is made up of lots of books, all put together in one big book.

The Bible is broken into two parts – the Old Testament (what happened before Jesus was born) and the New Testament (Jesus’ birth and what happened after).

The Bible is the best-selling book in the world every year.

The Bible was written by about 40 different authors.

There are about 185 songs in the Bible.

The whole Bible has been translated into 700 languages.

Given that staggering scope and reach, I think that what we need to celebrate is the diversity and the varying voices of the Bible, and the varying ways in which the different versions present the world of God, of Moses, of Galilee, of Jesus. When we’re not quite sure what’s going on, we’re not alone! Perhaps it’s because we don’t know the worldview that made writers write in the way that they did; we don’t know the community that they wrote for; we don’t know how, or if, the writers were trying to position their readers, to teach them to think in a certain way, as our reading from Timothy hints at; and we don’t know that we have *all* that they wrote, we might have only part of what they were trying to say. If we’re confused by our Bible, that’s natural!

That shouldn’t worry us as a church, because the great strength of church is that it *isn’t* a group of people who all think the same thing; church is a group of people drawn together in discipleship by the same story, the story of Jesus and his ministry for the world; it’s just when we try to make our understanding neat and tidy that we fall into difficulties. The Bible is a book that we hope contains a whole world, and more than that; but it spills out messily to us as we read it, and we try to grab the bis we can as it goes by. Timothy earlier said that scripture is *useful* for teaching – that’s a happy phrase, I think; *useful*, not an inerrant, unchanging sourcebook, but useful in trying to live our lives, if we are ‘persistent, whether the time is favourable or unfavourable.’ But it’ll never be neat – but then, I think neatness is over-rated!

I was much saddened this week to hear of the death of the great Irish poet, Brendan Kennelly; in one of his poems, he said

‘Do not come too near.

It is the space between

Enables something to grow.’

So perhaps don’t be worried if you feel space between yourself and the bible; space enables us to think, and to so to have a chance to grow in our own understanding.

On this Bible Sunday, we celebrate this strange, unwieldy, generous and challenging book. Why we keep returning to such a difficult book is plain as anything; as Jesus says, *‘You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life.’* Well, yes; but also we come back to it because in it we get pretty close to glimpsing the love of Jesus for us, and of our love for him.

And, at the sound of the last trumpet, that’s the only reason we need.

Amen.