

Scripture and Revival – Canon Neil Patterson

2nd Sunday of Easter (27th April 2025) – Evensong

Isaiah 53.1-6, 9-12 and Luke 24.13-35

“...he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.”

Some of you may have read in the news recently that there is reported to be something of a ‘Quiet Revival’ of Christianity in this country. It is all derived from a report by the Bible Society published a few weeks ago, to which I shall return in a bit. But first, to note the background that population surveys on Christian belief in England and Wales have been rather bleaker until now. In particular, a number of studies showed that the likelihood of someone professing themselves to be a Christian decreased with each generation alive, and that although some people of course both gain and lose faith, the proportion in any particular age generation stayed consistent. A rough summary of this was that of those born in the 1920s, 90% called themselves Christian, whereas of those born in the 1990s, only 20% - with a fairly steady slope down across the decades in between. And this was challenging indeed for all churches.

Whereas the new figures by comparison are remarkably different, and they are based on widespread polling conducted by YouGov – and in the light of the previous figures, note that this is about declared *church attendance* not merely Christian belief. In 2018 a survey found that only 4% of 18-24 year olds said they attended church regularly. The survey conducted last year found that now 16% of 18-24 years olds say they do. Note of course that these are not the same people, as those now 18-24 were still at school at not surveyed in 2018 – though there is some increase in that group too. But the idea that the level of Christian practice among young adults has quadrupled in six years is astonishing – so much so that, even allowing for some uncertainty of the figures, this is significant. There is more ethnic diversity among those now going to church than in 2018, but that is only a proportion of the growth. More young men than young women are going to church – 21% against 12%, and more of the growth is in Roman Catholic and Pentecostal churches than Anglican – though my sense is that we do have new people here who fit this pattern. And for all this we can rejoice.

The research also offers some, less certain, narrative about *why* there might be such an increase in younger people attending church - there are figures that they tend to want to practise their faith sincerely by praying, reading the Bible and engaging in social action more, and a sense that it is a generation seeking meaning and purpose in times of alienation and uncertainty. But the detail that interested me, and connects to today’s readings, is that as

the Bible Society commissioned the research, they did ask questions about attitudes to the Bible. Increased interest in the Bible and likelihood of reading it increased with Christian practice, which one might expect. But the key generation of 18-24 year olds also reported that they were more likely than other age groups to find their faith troubled by reading the Bible. And to that I thought, 'well, that's a good sign that they really are reading it, then!'

Back to the road to Emmaus. Luke tells us that the stranger on the road, *before revealing who he is*, hears from the disciples that they had hoped Jesus would be the one to redeem Israel, and corrects them by explaining that the Messiah had to suffer, and then 'beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted the things about himself in all the scriptures.' The "scriptures" in this context of course mean what we call the Old Testament, and a naïve new Christian might be led to start reading it, looking out cheerfully for all the things telling him about Jesus' future life, death and resurrection. Unfortunately, on a cold reading, that doesn't seem to be what the Old Testament is about at all. After the opening about the creation of the world, it is after all a selection of writings, only some of which make up a continuous (and rather complicated) narrative, about a particular people in history and their relationship with their God. We can be forgiven for thinking the disciples on the road really didn't help us very much – if only they had taken notes of all the references that Jesus gave them so that we could look them up more easily now!

Of course, in many places the Gospels and other parts of the New Testament do make very clear references to places in the Old. And our first reading this evening was one of those often referred to – the image of the Suffering Servant from towards the end of Isaiah. Maybe that was one of the scriptures he referred to, and you may recall that in Luke's sequel to his Gospel, the Acts of the Apostles, it is the passage the Ethiopian eunuch is reading in his chariot and asks Philip to explain for him. And that need to explain is precisely it. The relationship between the Gospel message and the Hebrew scriptures of the people of Israel is not simple or transparent. At times phrases from the Psalms are picked up as prophecy in a way that is far from obvious, or elaborate metaphors like that of Hagar and Sarah, the slave-woman and the free, that Paul uses in Galatians, may invite puzzlement as much as understanding. And of course a great deal of the Old Testament doesn't seem to have very much to do with Jesus at all, and at times to offer major ethical challenges to us. The survey did not go into enough detail to say whether it is this sort of issue that means that reading the Bible can challenge the faith of young Christians, but I believe that the issues will always come up, and so we have to face them.

So, why read the whole of the Bible at all? Christians have not always done so. Most historic lectionaries (the guides to which texts should be read at services) – that of the Book of Common Prayer, the Roman Catholic Church before Vatican II, and the Orthodox

churches to this day – set particular readings for each Sunday of the year, and that's it for main services. What we live with in England is a Protestant inheritance which can tend (as the Bible Society themselves do) to treat the Bible as a whole as a single artefact, rather to be held up and admired. The answer, to me at any rate, is the same as in the proverbial school assembly – Jesus. We read the scriptures because of Jesus Christ, not believe in Jesus Christ because the Bible says so – otherwise what do they stand on? We read the New Testament because it is the original set of witnesses to his life, death and resurrection, and we read the Old Testament because those sacred books of Jesus' people and nation are what he called 'scripture' and from where he and his first followers drew their understanding of his mission and work. So yes, I do encourage you to read your Bibles! Regularly!

Seeing the Scriptures in this way, though, helps I think to show us two things. The first is that all reading of the Bible comes with interpretation if it is to make any sense at all. If you spend any time at all in dialogue with Jews, as I have, you will quickly find that there are quite different ways of understanding the whole Hebrew scriptures, with very different parts coming across as most important. The technical term is a hermeneutic, if that helps you. So be aware – are you consciously or unconsciously looking for and finding particular aspects of what you read – a tendency to dwell on your own sins and feel unworthy before God, or to find words of reassurance that stop you worrying, or clear evidence that you are right? The Bible itself has a tendency to challenge our own hermeneutics, but that does not mean we cannot easily be misled.

And the other is to recall that just as we read the Scriptures because they lead us to Jesus Christ, so it is right as Christians have for centuries to look for him in Scripture, whether that is in the ethics of particular issues dug into by Paul or the stories of Israelite kings long ago. This is, of course, a circle, like most real sources of meaning – but if we are not being led back again and again in our reading to Jesus in his life, death and glorious Easter resurrection, we are reading it wrong. So go, read, and seek to be led closer to Christ day by day. Amen.