

The optional 'Bible Sunday' theme for today invites us to reflect on the great gift of the Scriptures, but any evaluation in the 8 minutes maximum that I allow myself as a merciful preacher is bound to be all too brief and inadequate for so great a subject. A few thoughts and convictions will have to suffice. The first thing to say is that I absolutely love the Bible, but without committing the sin of idolising it or treating it in a way diminishes its authority, status and function.

The Bible is sacred scripture for two major world religious traditions. The Hebrew Bible (what we call the Old Testament) is sacred for the Jews. The Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are sacred for Christians. I mean *all* Christians, not just those who like to call themselves 'Bible-believing Christians' as if others are somehow not!

The Bible writers were undoubtedly inspired by their relationship with God, although none of them would have understood themselves to be writing sacred texts that would be read by people hundreds or thousands of years in the future, and thousands of miles away. St. Paul would have been amazed to know that his letters to the early Christian communities would one day be included in a set of scriptures called the New Testament. All the authors and editors of scripture present testimonies of their experience of God and address the issues and questions of their times and milieus. When we try to apply many of the Bible texts to our own situations, we do well to try to understand what these texts meant to the people who first read or heard them.

To speak of the Bible as sacred reflects not its origins but its status within a religious community. The Bible does not have a life of its own outside the community or communities of faith which produced it and agreed the texts to be sacred scripture. The Bible speaks from faith to faith. Its various forms were written by people belonging to the faith communities for which they wrote, whether Jewish or Christian. These are the most important collection of writings we possess, the primary writings that define who we are in relation to God. The Bible is the book that has shaped us as Christians and will continue to shape us as we live this life.

Sadly, many Christians or church traditions, have got into a real mess over the Bible. Some have fallen into what we can justly call 'bibliolatry,' embracing a fundamentalist or literalist understanding of the scriptures, which has placed

them on the wrong side of truth again and again. Many have misused the texts of the Bible for their own egotistic motives, to support their own prejudices, to justify war, slavery, racial superiority, misogyny, homophobia, and more, all of which have caused great harm. And from the earliest times, there has been an unfortunate temptation among some Christians to want the Bible to be an oracle, something which conveys the very *words* of God, unmediated and unconditioned by the human minds and hands which wrote them down.

But from the misuse and abuse of the Bible to its greatest gift, and the main reason it is so important to us. It introduces us to Jesus. Without the Bible we would not know about him. And we would not know the Hebrew Scriptures that formed him. And there would obviously be no New Testament telling us how the decisive Word of God (capital W), the Christ, was made known, incarnated, embodied in that unique life.

Jesus is also our inspiration for how to read the Bible. He could clearly tell the difference between the written words and the overall purpose and spirit of the texts. We see how he openly disagrees with scriptures that emphasize non-essentials, what he calls 'mere human commandments' that were presented by the religious elite of his day as divine commandments. He consistently ignores exclusionary, punitive, and triumphal texts in favour of passages that emphasize compassion, inclusion, justice, and honesty. He uses scripture to defend people, not attack them, except those who use the texts to attack and to exclude. He had a deeper and wider eye that knew which passages were creating a path for God and which passages were merely cultural, self-serving, or legalistic additions. He possessed Jewish common sense.

In Jesus, his teaching and example, we see more clearly than anywhere else what the character, the passion, and the vision of God looks like. He is the norm, the standard, and the climax of the revelation of God that gradually unfolds through the pages of the Bible.

If we understand the Bible as a diverse library of witness to the character and activity of God evolving over many centuries and culminating in the appearance of Jesus Christ, we shall come to a fair appreciation of its true status and authority. If we read it regularly, carefully, and prayerfully, allowing

the Spirit to open our hearts and minds to its truth and direction, the Bible will have a life-giving and stimulating effect because it witnesses to life which is life indeed.

The Bible witnesses to the character and activity of God through the medium of entirely human witnesses and writers. It is unique, having no rival as a witness to the word of God; and it is sufficient in that supplies us with enough material to understand about our life in God and how we should live and about our hope of eternity. It imparts life and power because it witnesses to life and power. It is an earthenware vessel that contains our treasure. It is the manger in which we find the Christ.