

AN ALL-TOO-FAMILIAR BOOK

Isaiah 45. 22-25

Romans 15. 1-6

Luke 4. 16-24

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Let me take you to an ordinary Sabbath day in the remote Galilean village of Nazareth sometime around the year 30 AD. That Sabbath day was one that turned out to be a climactic moment in the history of God's people. St Luke, like all the gospel writers, was a consummate story teller: he knew how to take time as he described an event, setting the scene and allowing the tension to mount. Our Lord returns to his home town, Nazareth, perched on the side of a steep valley. The people have heard of what he has been doing, healing and preaching in Capernaum, down by the lakeside. But surely he's one of them, he's 'their boy'; and so some of the villagers in Nazareth don't believe what they've been hearing, yet others of them are anxious to see what Jesus will do. Christ goes to the local synagogue and stands to read. The scroll is given to him, and he unrolls it. The scroll is actually the book of Isaiah, which contains some of the most powerful messianic prophecies in Scripture. Very deliberately, our Lord finds the passage he wants and reads one of those prophecies. He rolls the scroll up again, gives it to the attendant and sits down (the traditional posture for teaching in the synagogue). Luke makes us wait; and at last the pause ends and Christ speaks. His proclamation is nothing short of staggering: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

In our appointed text from the epistle to the Romans, we read that 'whatever was written in the former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope'.

The Jews certainly did believe that Scripture was written for their instruction and encouragement, to help them to be steadfast as they waited for the Messiah. In the synagogue that day, they would have been expecting our Lord to speak to them about how they would recognise the Messiah. They would have been expecting Jesus to explain how the Messiah would do the wonderful things prophesied by Isaiah: establish justice, peace and prosperity; overthrow the oppression of the Romans; and restore the golden age of David.

But they didn't expect it to be *today*, or *him*. We can hear the concern and the disbelief in their voices as they say, 'Is not this Joseph's son?'

That climactic day, Christ claimed to be the Messiah. By saying that 'today this scripture has been fulfilled in their hearing', our Lord was saying that this text is about him. This is who he is.

Today on this Bible Sunday, however great or sketchy our knowledge of the scriptures may be, are we truly expecting biblical prophecies to be fulfilled? Do we believe that God is at work in our lives? Are we expecting and allowing the example of Jesus to strengthen us to witness to God's love and to live in harmony, as St Paul writes to the Romans that they must?

What can we learn about the numbing, inoculating effect of the *familiar* from the way the people reacted to Christ's claim? We have seen that they couldn't believe that this local boy was more than just the carpenter's son, however well he spoke; and after he faced them with some truths about the way God had been working not only for his Jewish children but also for the Gentiles down the centuries, they rejected him entirely and tried to push him over a cliff.

But at least they knew enough to know what he was saying. Do we, and would we? I think that we need to recognise today on this Bible Sunday, what it was that made the people of Nazareth able to understand the implications of what our Lord was saying. It was because they, like their descendants today, were *utterly familiar* with the scriptures and the promises of God to his people. They knew that these scriptures revealed God's purposes for them. This was why they were able to grasp the huge claim that Jesus was making. For the Jews, the scriptures were their whole life; and all their hope was embodied in them. They studied the scriptures as they had been commanded in the book of Deuteronomy, where it says:

'You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates...' (11. 18-20).

Christ has this commitment too, an utter commitment to the hallowed words he had known since childhood; and there in Nazareth he shares his understanding with his people. But it is clear from his words that he understands the radical countercultural potential of the scriptures. In fact, if you think about it, it was his constant radical interpretation of the scriptures that got him into trouble.

Unfortunately, we often sanitise and neutralise the radical message of God. John Pritchard, formerly the Bishop of Oxford, has written that it takes someone with a big vision to point out the implications of what has become *too familiar* to us. He quotes Mahatma Gandhi, who wrote: 'You Christians look after a document containing enough dynamite to blow all civilisations to pieces, turn the world upside down and bring peace to a battle-torn planet. But you treat it as though it's nothing more than a piece of literature!'

And it can be even worse than that. We, many of us, treat the Bible like a part of the furniture, kept on a shelf, kept by our beds, and perhaps appreciate it for its comforting familiarity. Yet we never allow it to catch fire, or still less to *set us on fire*.

It's not that we don't care about the Bible. It's that it is so familiar to us that we have become de-sensitised to its dynamic power and its wonder. We have forgotten its ability to instruct, strengthen and encourage. We no longer consider it as a treasure that can transform lives and places, where change and hope are desperately needed.

If there are any of you here today who do not have a Bible at home, I hope that you will let me know. I have many copies of the Bible in my study and I would be more than pleased to give you one that you can keep for your own.

And for those of you who have their Bibles to hand at home, whether or not you read them regularly, here's my challenge. I'd like you to consider doing one of two things, or if you are so-minded, to do both.

The first challenge: sometime today, or sometime tomorrow, sit down and begin by reading a favourite Bible passage. Then carry on reading and see what God says. Remember how our Lord shocked the people of Nazareth by showing them a familiar passage in a new light. Allow God to speak to you, at the time or even later.

The second challenge is this: choose one of the gospels, and read it through, just like a novel. Mark has 16 chapters, Luke has 24, Matthew has 28 and John has 21. So that means that you can easily read a chapter a day between now and Advent Sunday. And if you do this, it will be a very positive way of preparing for Christmas, to remind yourself what the baby Jesus did when he grew up, and who he is for each one of us, in this world and the next. Amen.