

Opening the Book

Psalm 19; Luke 4:14-21

"Let the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable to You, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer."

These words paraphrasing the last verse of Psalm 19 are often the first words spoken by a preacher prior to delivering a sermon. It has certainly been my practice for decades. God's Word is spoken, through the imperfect medium of a preacher. Your work, and it's hard work, is to try to discern what on earth it is that God might be saying to You through what I try to say. Sometimes you hear it; sometimes you miss it; sometimes there's nothing relevant; sometimes you can't believe how what is preached in a sermon can speak so directly to you. "How did you know?" Is one of the most flattering, and unnerving, things someone can say at the Church door. Most of us up here in pulpits try week after week to help people understand a little about what this book about believing and doubting and wondering is about.

Of course, when I say book, I should say, 'books'. The Bible is a library of different kinds of book, written by different people, over a period of a thousand years or so, roughly between 1200 BC and 100 AD. There is history and poetry and song; there is law and imagining about the future; there is radical commentary on society, then and now; there are stories and collections of sayings from the followers of Jesus who try to give us different pictures of Who He is and what they thought He meant. There are bits of it that are eminently understandable and applicable to life today; and there are bits whose application is time-limited to long ago.

The Bible remains uniquely popular across the world.

The King received a Coronation Bible, presented by the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. The Moderator said:

“Sir, to keep you ever mindful of the law and the Gospel of God as the Rule for the whole life and government of Christian Princes, receive this Book, the most valuable thing that this world has to offer. Here is Wisdom; this is the Royal Law; these are the lively Oracles of God.”

American presidents, when taking the oath of office, generally put their hand on the Bible; though not last week, where some wicked commentator suggested if that had happened there may have been a fire risk.

Psalm 19 reminds us that the heavens also tell us about the glory of God, the Created world around us. It is a reminder that God’s voice has not been locked up in the print of Scripture. God is still speaking through the majesty of Creation, and the better impulses and actions of humanity. One informs and illuminates the other, working in tandem so that we are enabled to ask and wonder and believe about what God is saying and doing today, and how we might engage, for ourselves, in that saying and doing. God offers these different revelations as guidance, but they are not, I believe, the only Word. Through art and music, through the beauty and needs of Creation, through aspects of the Bible’s printed words we find ourselves, if we are willing, guided to think about what these things might mean, how these things apply, why these things have relevance, and what is our response to them.

Not the heavy legalistic, one-dimensional hand of literalism, but the key that opens our minds and hearts and challenges and invites us to make our own response. *“There have been many people ...and they have asked questions as big as ours. That is what the Scriptures are to Christians – the wisdom of those who have encountered God. Our willingness to read scripture and to be read by scripture is a sign of our humility that we take our place as small players in a huge story,*

the general shape of which can be determined or ruined by us. Scripture isn't a constellation of disembodied ideals: it's an earthy series of pragmatic instances of fragile human encounters with the ultimate reality, distilled and percolated over time into wisdom.^{vi}

What do the words of this book mean? What was the context in which they were written? Do they have something to say to us today? The aim of preaching is to explore these things.

This was the aim of Jesus as He preached in the synagogues of Galilee, and finally in His home synagogue in Nazareth. Jesus would have grown up with what we call the Old Testament, it was all the Bible He had. In it there were parts that spoke to Him and that He wanted to share with anyone who would listen. His Nazareth reading is from the Prophet Isaiah, announces Who Jesus is, of what His ministry will consist, what the Christian Church afterwards should be and do, and what kind of response to Jesus and the Church might be.

Jesus opened the book, unrolled the scroll, and read what the Spirit had chosen.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

And then Jesus says, ***Today*** *this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.* The first public word of Jesus as an adult, apart from reading Scripture, is, "***today***." The age of God's active involvement in the world has arrived. The time when God's promises are to be fulfilled is now. There are to be changes in the conditions of those who have waited and hoped. Those changes for the poor and the wronged and the oppressed are to occur today. The time of God is today. 'Today' began with Jesus, and it continues, today! Today never becomes yesterday, or a vague 'someday.'ⁱⁱ Jesus has opened the book and has told the people of faith, all the things that you long for, dream about, pray for, we are meant with God to make them happen, today!

The words leap off the page and lands with challenge onto the ears of humanity. Some were thrilled with what Jesus said, some wanted to lynch Him. But the point is clear, the written words, even the spoken words, were not going to be enough to make God's Kingdom come. The words would have to be put into action and lived out. When Jesus opened the book, when Jesus read, when the people heard, something must happen. The words were read out, but the words were read in. When the Book is opened, the words of Scripture read us. What they ask will include: "Is this true? Is this real? Is this supposed to make me do something? What am I going to do about them? Do my actions, does my faith, match up with what Jesus has read out?" In our Church, in our politics, in every institution we have that has power, in the lives of every responsible human being, where are the acts of human compassion and social justice. It's not simply about what does God demand for the sake of righteousness. It is, rather, who needs attention and compassion and mercy, and who will be the ones who will bring these things about?

We saw it in the words of the American Episcopalian bishop who gently asked the leaders of her country to be merciful. And she, like Jesus, has been reviled by those leaders, and with some people wishing her dead. Faith always has a political dimension because it has a human dimension and an economic dimension and a moral dimension. Whether you agree or not with what was said by that bishop, none can say that Jesus never called His followers to be merciful. His idea in theory sounds wonderful; it's what it means when it is put into practice that is the troubling issue, from His day forward.

When we open the book, when we look at what God implies and Jesus says, when we think about, 'What does this mean for me? What am I supposed to do', we are invited to engage in the dance of a practical faith whose steps are meant to follow God's tune, and whose working out is meant to make God's Creation, people and everything else, better.

No wonder people keep it shut. No wonder people tuck it away in cupboards and drawers, still in its wrappings.

But in Church we carry it in publicly at the beginning of each service, and the book is opened, and we read, and we listen, and we wonder.

And then, please God, we do.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ *Sam Wells, Learning to Dream Again, pxvii*

ⁱⁱ *Fred B Craddock, Luke, p62*