

Sunday 29th April 2018
Easter 5 (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

NT: Acts 8.26-end

NT: I John 4.7-end

G: John 15.1-8

How can I, unless someone guides me? If hermeneutics had a strap line that would be it.

How can I, unless someone guides me? Hermeneutics is defined as *the theory and methodology of interpretation, especially the interpretation of biblical texts, wisdom literature, and philosophical texts.*

The Bible. Most people have heard of it. Many people have read bits of it or are at least familiar with some of its texts. Some of its stories are ingrained into our culture, our national psyche, are part of the referencing of the story of our lives – whether or not we believe.

There are those who would argue that the Bible has been the cause of much blood shed and war through the centuries. Others believe that every word comes directly from the mouth of God and that it has to be taken literally. God really did create the world in 6 days, there is no such thing as evolution, the big bang is a fantasy. Others still dismiss the Bible as irrelevant in our modern, high tech, instant communication world. It belongs to the past.

I once attempted to read the Bible from cover to cover but soon became stranded in the genealogical mire of the book of Numbers. That is not its purpose. Or you can open the Bible at any page, lift out a verse and use it to argue black is white or white is black. And God knows that through the centuries, many have done just that and used the Bible to justify their own dubious intentions. And that too is not its purpose.

However you view it, the Bible was and remains a powerful tool. It is really a code, a code which can only be truly interpreted by the light of the Holy Spirit. Together with prayer and the sacraments it is a means that God uses to speak with his people. Its words are not embalmed in amber as some fossil but live and breathe as God speaks to each one of us in the place we find ourselves as we journey to his kingdom, to know even as we are fully known.

This morning we have heard three passages from the Bible and each one of us will have heard them differently.

Philip's meeting with the Ethiopian on the road to Gaza is reminiscent of Jesus' meeting with the disciples on the road to Emmaus. *They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?'*

This is the same Philip who when the Greeks asked to see Jesus, he took them instead to Andrew as if he were reluctant to approach Jesus directly. It was also Philip who so frustrated Jesus when he asked to see the Father so that he could then believe in Jesus as God and man.

Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.' Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.'

Now through the power of the Holy Spirit, Philip is able to interpret the scriptures for this stranger, to open the code and reveal the story of God's love for his people, a love without parallel which is confirmed in the suffering, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, true God and true man. Suddenly a story of someone butchering a sheep takes on an incredible meaning that no literal interpretation could ever imagine.

We are so familiar with Jesus as the lamb of God, we say it at every Eucharist, many of us even know the Latin, *Agnus Dei*, that we cannot see the confusion that it might cause in others.

As Christians we are called to follow Jesus in opening the scriptures and their meanings to others.

But we must avoid the danger of putting our own slant on this interpretation. In this context we are not single entities but members of Christ's body. In another familiar metaphor, Christ is the vine and we are the branches. We cannot survive without him, the central vine. *because apart from me you can do nothing.*

And not only that but we are an integral part of each other, inextricably linked through the life blood of the central vine, our Lord.

My only real experience of actual vines is happily enjoying the end product, preferably red rather than white but ultimately not that fussy!

But what I do know is that the central vines can be ancient and that they respond to careful cultivation and the conditions of the soil and climate in which they grow. I know too that no one year's grape, and therefore wine, production is the same as the next. Conditions change, weather patterns alter. Each year the shoots spring anew and each year they produce different fruit.

This is a metaphor for our Christian journey, for our interpretation of the Bible and its powerful stories. St Paul could skirt over the issue of slavery in his day because it was a fundamental part of the culture, it was established and accepted. And in any case, Paul, like the early Christians believed the world was about to end and Christ was about to appear in all his glory.

In our culture today, we see the evil of modern slavery and human trafficking. Only this week, I heard of the practice of forcibly removing children from their families, so that orphanages can be established, and money collected from those of us in the West wanting to do good but actually unintentionally supporting criminal practices.

The Bible challenges us today to act to eradicate slavery in a way that it might not have done in previous generations. The Bible is a code which can only be truly interpreted by the light of the Holy Spirit. It is a powerful and potentially dangerous tool but used as God intends it is a tool for change like no other book.

The Benedictines have an approach to the Bible called Lectio Divina – Divine Reading.

It does not treat Scripture as texts to be studied, but as the Living Word. Perhaps this week you can take today's gospel and read it over several times until a phrase stands out and draws you into quiet, reflective prayer so that God speaks to you of its meaning for you at this time. In this way you may experience what the writer of the letter to the Hebrews found that

the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

The Revd Michelle Montrose