

Sunday 27th January 2019
Epiphany 4 (C)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Nehemiah 8.1-3,5-6,8-10
NT: I Corinthians 12.12-31a
G: Luke 4.14-21

‘The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”’

There are few things more galling than being short changed or ripped off. Perhaps it is the far off Scottish ancestry coming to the fore or maybe it is the generational angst of a typical millennial saddled with debt bursting through, but it is an experience that I find particularly frustrating and, since I’ve been ordained, appears to be happening more and more often. Maybe people take advantage, assuming that priests and deacons have a gullible otherworldliness about them (if so they really haven’t spent much time among clergy- especially not those of Liverpool Parish Church) or maybe it’s my fault- too much time spent on reading books and not enough time spent balancing them perhaps. Either way, from Virgin Trains to the restaurant that managed to pass off a glorified panini as a pizza the other day- a frustration with not quite getting my due has become a regular trope. I even felt, frankly, short changed when I first looked at our Gospel reading this morning.

The first three lines are a travel itinerary of Jesus’s movements, the main chunk in the middle is a quote from the prophet Isaiah, then finally, we get a single sentence from Jesus- ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’. If you came to church today expecting one of the Biblical hit parade’s great narrative top hits- a Good Samaritan, a feeding of the five thousand, perhaps even a healing of a paralytic, you might well feel disappointed too. And yet, this episode in the life of Christ, near the very start of his public

ministry, is not necessarily the short-changing that it first appears- in fact it opens up an entire debate about what scripture is and how it works.

What does the Bible mean to you? Is it just the collection of texts we happen to read out of three times each Sunday in Church? Is it an embarrassment, with real religious truth being found in what you feel? Is it a text book by which we work out empirical laws and live our lives accordingly? I would suggest that the vision of Scripture that emerges from the teaching of Christ here, and, indeed, throughout the Bible itself, is a very different one.

First and foremost- Scripture, the Bible, the Word- call it what you will- is presented as living. That is to say it is not ossified, it is not simply text available to read and then take or leave, but rather it has life, and, beyond that, the power to give life. It has immense emotional power, it has vigorous spiritual resonance, it has depth and breadth and not just across the canon of the Bible itself, but in each and every sentence and word. Take Paul's exhortations in the first letter to the Corinthians that we heard earlier- on one level there is a simple truth; that of different gifts being present in different people. Yet on another level it throws up all kinds of much deeper questions about what identity is, how it ties in with functionality, with group think, with the individual, the external versus the internal- the list goes on. These are live questions, deep questions- in many ways the fact that we receive scripture in purely textual format belies its deeper truths- it is an ongoing conversation about who and what we are. As long as there is a human race of living people, the questions, stories, poetry and conundrums that make up Scripture will always be living ones too.

How does this living aspect manifest itself, we might well ask? It's all very good saying it is living and treating it as such when we acclaim, kiss and cense it in church, but how is it so? At its heart is conversation- which is surely the great mark of living (though, I will confess, I've sometimes been sat next to people at dinner parties that have made me question that

qualification). That is why we shouldn't feel short changed that most of what claims to be Luke this morning is in fact Isaiah- that is the point; texts are not stand alone incidents but living words that talk one to another and, of course, to us, the readers. Reading and hearing the Bible is not a voyeuristic exercise looking in on a better forgotten past but rather part of a much wider exploration of what it is to relate to one another and to God, an exploration which calls us to take an active part.

There are manifold other ways that Scripture lives- it provides evocative imagery, it speaks to our living situations now, it provokes strong emotional responses in every direction- to name but a few. But the relational aspect of scripture, and the particular relation of human being, you and I to God, is what makes it the Living Word in its own unique way, as opposed to any other text that might be said to have been 'brought to life'. Scripture is a conversation that enriches those beyond the actors themselves, that is not limited to the players on the page but is the spark for a multiplicity of further conversations and experiences that, to put no finer point on it, change lives. Indeed, we can go one further- at the heart of Scripture we are invited into a relationship that actively gives life- and life that will last beyond the vagaries of earthly existence. In short, we are asked to do as the listeners in the synagogue do- to fix our eyes on Jesus. By doing so, by fixing our hearts and eyes and minds on Jesus, the epitome of the God-Man relationship- the incarnate, the rest of the dance of scripture no longer looks like a series of seemingly random thrashings around the club dancefloor of history and, instead, a waltz around the centre of all things- the God who knows and loves us.

Paul's rhetorical question to the Corinthians that 'if all were a single member, where would the body be?' is of relevance here too. Scripture is often referred to as a corpus- a body. Bodies, both physical and metaphorical, have bits that are more appealing than others- so too is the case with Scripture. Yet it is, as Paul makes clear, folly to hack off an uglier piece in

an attempt to beautify the whole. If it were all easy, and affirming, and satisfying, it would cease to be living- cease to reflect the actual breathing reality of the world that God chose to be born into in the person of Christ. In short, if scripture only told us what we wanted to hear it would cease, in essence, to be true. And so it compels us to take that body as a whole if we are to discern its beauty and truth, just as humanity, for all its much more egregious failings, was taken on in its entirety by God himself. If we are to make sense of that complex entirety to have- as Jesus himself says 'Scripture fulfilled in our hearing', our only hope is to fix our eyes on the one who encapsulates that entirety in himself.

With our eyes fixed on Jesus, Scripture becomes truly relational- as the rollercoaster of the divine relationship with mankind through which we might discern what it is to be human is given an end and a beginning which are one and the same. That said, it would be wrong to suggest that the vision of scripture presented here is one of an easy to follow text book, to which we might easily apply categories of truth claims which were themselves only constructed amidst the flurry of Western intellectual onanism that was the Enlightenment. As our reading from Nehemiah makes clear- even the legal code of Moses requires interpretation and understanding applied from without. And, even then, as the continued travails of Israel in the Old Testament show- as the sometimes very negative uses of Scripture across the world today demonstrate as well- a legalistic, technical approach to the life of the Word almost invariably saps rather than gives life. That is not the joy to which we are called. Instead, we are invited to enter into a story, a dance, which is ongoing, which continues to be relational across the vast chasms of time- linking Isaiah and Ezra and us in the rich seam of scriptural word that leads us, inexorably, to the Living Word. That is to Christ.

So go forth, read your Bibles- the odd bits, the boring bits, the moving bits, the sexy bits, the affirming bits, the challenging bits, the violent bits, the peaceful bits, all of it- it is unlikely

to be something you regret or feel short changed by; but throughout, I would implore, keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, then you might truly find scripture fulfilled in your hearing.

Fr Fergus Butler-Gallie