

Bible Sunday

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 24 October 2021

Readings: 2 Timothy 3.14 - 4.5 and John 5.36b - end

I love maps. I usually take a map when we go walking. Yet the same thing happens almost every time, when somebody passes me when I am looking at the map. 'Are you lost? Can I help you?' It happened yesterday afternoon, as I was trying to work out why a path near La Corbière, shown on the States of Guernsey map as a footpath, was sporting a large sign proclaiming that the land was private.

I just like maps, and especially when I can compare modern maps with maps from years ago, when I can track the changes. For anyone who loves walking and travelling, a good set of maps is vital, as well as the ability to read the maps and to use tools like a compass.

There's the danger of being deskilled – thanks to the growing use of global positioning devices and the apps we have on our phones. Of course satellite navigation is useful, and it is here to stay. It guides us and gives us instructions. It tells us when we have gone wrong, and, sometimes at least, gets us back on to the right route. It can help us to find our way around blocked roads and diversions, which we hadn't anticipated, however carefully we had prepared the route. But we mustn't lose our critical faculties. In the early days of satellite navigation in the UK, there were many horror stories of motorists suspending their critical faculties when faced with a new gadget: one who ignored diversion signs and drove into a landslide because his satellite navigation hadn't picked up the diversion; and others who were directed from the M5 on to a narrow country lane with a deep ford across a river in Somerset - the ford too deep for cars and the local farmer regularly earning money for pulling cars out with his tractor; and so on.

Today is Bible Sunday, a day promoted originally by the Bible Society to remind Christians in this country about the continuing importance of the Society's work in making the Bible available, especially in those languages into which it has not yet been translated and through all the different media which we use for communication today. But Bible Sunday has taken on a wider significance as a day when we can reflect on the importance of the Bible for Christians everywhere. The readings we have heard today are those chosen for Bible Sunday.

In our lives as Christians, engaging with the Bible is crucial for our growth to Christian maturity, if we are to make the best of our lives by letting God's words shape and form us (for example, the commandments, which Jesus summarises as: 'Love God. Love your neighbour as yourself.'). But more widely, the loss of Biblical literacy in wider society is a major issue – and makes it harder to understand great works of art and music as well as so much of English literature.

On our roads, directions help to give us order and safety. Christian lives are like long roads, on which we move towards God - sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly because of delays. Sometimes the road is straight and clear. At other times, winding and confusing. At times we are clear about where we are going in our lives. At other times, there is doubt and uncertainty.

Just as on the roads and footpaths along the Guernsey cliffs, we need directions on our Christian journey.

The greatest help is Jesus himself. Before Jesus came, people had directions through the law in the Old Testament, which God gave through Moses, but this was made too complicated because of the human additions to the initial simplicity of God's law. The Old Testament relates the experience of the people of Israel wrestling with the law and God's unfolding revelation of himself through the history of the people and the words of the prophets. But we needed a personal guide - so God sent his son, Jesus, in whom all God's revelation is focussed and fulfilled.

Over the thousands of years, our culture and experience has changed, and we may struggle with some of the references and cultural presuppositions in the Bible. But the Bible has an un-nerving knack of telling us the truth about human nature and showing us where we've gone wrong. The stories, even from the early days of the Old Testament, speak to us, remarkably, about what is happening in our own day.

To return to the maps analogy, the Bible helps to set our moral and faith compass, getting us back on the right route when we stray off the road. But God doesn't ask us to suspend our critical faculties when we read the Bible - any more than we should do so when we rely on satellite navigation in our cars. The Bible may seem strange when we first come to it. We need to study and wrestle with Scripture - either on our own, through regular reading of the Bible, or in groups.

For truly reliable information about a place, we need someone with genuine local knowledge alongside us. And this, as Paul tells Timothy, is really what an encounter with God's Word is like. The Scriptures are not just 'useful for teaching and helping' us know what to do, but for showing us how to live, and by showing us God, often in the proximity of those who knew and know him most intimately.

The Bible is living, 'inspired' by God - which means that it is full of the breath of his life, speaking to us when we least expect it, even from a passage with which we are familiar, and capable of making a difference to our lives.

Our worship is important, our single minded focus on God. Our worship must be rooted in the Bible, the breaking open and study of God's living word, even when it's complex, like the reading from the letter to the Hebrews, some of which I tried, and probably failed, to explore last Sunday. It was a rather indigestible sermon, for which I apologise.

And yet even the Bible is not enough for us to flourish spiritually, unless it comes to life. It is always pointing to God, who alone can give us life. When we focus on God, through Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit, our worship and our study of the Bible can speak to us in such a way that we are truly fed and grow to be the people that God, in his love, calls us to be.