

# Sunday 25 October: Bible Sunday, Twentieth Sunday after Trinity

## The Word of God

**Readings: Isaiah 55. 1-11; John 5.36-end**

There have been two pieces of art that have had a big impact on me over the last few days. One was entering into Miroslaw Balka's *How It Is*, the vast cavernous dark steel container in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern; the other was standing in front of Anish Kapoor's *Yellow* at the Royal Academy, a huge sun-like sculpture that draws you in, so much so that it is as if you enter the colour, losing and finding yourself within it. Both the overwhelming darkness that surrounds you as you walk up the ramp and enter Balka's work and Kapoor's vibrant colour touch something deep within. As you stand in the darkness, looking back towards the light, the surroundings are variously felt as womb-like, overpowering, intimidating, comforting. With *Yellow*, the experience is lighter, more of an invitation. You cannot look at these works as an outside observer to experience them, you have to enter into them and allow them to fill your senses, becoming lost within them and being transformed by them.

As we come to celebrate Bible Sunday today, there is something of that sense of entering into the Word of God that touches us in that same way. In order to read the bible we literally have to enter into it and live it, lose and find ourselves in its pages – its more challenging, as well as in its well known and beautiful parts. When the St John's Bible was given as a gift to this church earlier this year, from the Benedictine community of monks at St John's in Minnesota, Donald Jackson, the Queen's calligrapher who led this project, talked about the experience of creating it. Twelve painstaking years to write and draw the handwritten manuscript. He expressed the artists' overwhelming sense of awe and wonder when they finally stepped back and saw the whole bible. It was only because they had entered into and lost themselves within the detail of it, that they were then able to comprehend the sheer beauty of what was there.

Today we celebrate and give thanks for the life and revelation of God in the scriptures, the written word of God, a library of 66 books, rather than one, written over a span of 1400 years and available to 98% of the world's population to read in a language that they know. We treasure the truth of God expressed there, the richness of form and language. We are called to engage with all our senses, to wrestle with the parts that challenge and confront us and to use all our intellect and imagination to understand it. There should always be a sense that understanding is a little beyond our reach, so that we work towards a deeper experience of God in its pages.

Sometimes it is not easy to find the life expressed within the pages of the bible, as those of us who have been doggedly working our way through the 1<sup>st</sup> book of Maccabees at morning prayer for the last two weeks will know. But it is in the consistent reading of scripture by ourselves and the hearing of it again and again in our services and in our prayers, layer upon layer, that we become immersed in its life; in the creative word of God that draws us in. Reading in this way we are connected to the life flowing through it. We find our own life – our emotions and experiences – mapped within it. I vividly remember when I first really engaged with the text, struggling through the book of Job, made real for me at a time in my life of huge questioning. How apt that I was drawn to that particular book that contemplates suffering, as I wondered 'Why me?' We will each have our own experience of this kind of connection.

The living creative Word or life of God, that is found as a deep stream running through the scriptures, is described so beautifully by the prophet Isaiah. It quenches our thirst, satisfies our appetite, brings life and growth - calling us to thoughts and ways beyond ourselves.

*Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.*

It is this creative word of God that will shape us and challenge us as a community. We need to be soaked in it and absorbed by it and so be led into new understanding and onto new paths. Each time we open our hearts and minds to the scriptures there is the capacity to connect to and touch this living God. Expressed most fully in God's living Word, Jesus Christ.

But what happens when we don't allow ourselves to see the scriptures as a living text, through which we can find God, but read it with the barrier of our prejudices and fears or use it for our own ends?

Jesus' words in our Gospel to 'the jews' who use the scriptures as a weapon to condemn when they find him healing on the Sabbath, show how easy it is to manipulate the words of God, standing outside judging, rather than risking being open to the potential life within them.

*You search the scriptures because you think in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life.*

Reading with closed minds, they fail to recognise Jesus the living word of God, who is the key to understanding all the scriptures and the fulfilment of the law that they profess to live by. Rather than seeing that the scriptures bear witness to Jesus, they remain locked outside, refusing to see what is before their eyes. And so they miss out on the life transforming experience of knowing the presence of the Word of God dwelling within them and the life of Jesus before them.

In the same way, the authority of the bible and specific texts have been used to defend all sorts of victimization throughout history including racism and slavery and the position of women. The contemporary struggles over gender and same sex relationships once again use scripture as something to create barriers to define who is in and who is out; treating scripture as something life denying and distorted, rather than a way to freedom and life and peace; the living word of God that includes rather than excludes, that brings life rather than denies it.

As we enter into the life of God we are called to places and understanding beyond ourselves. God's thoughts and ways are greater than ours. Like the works of art we only understand by entering in.

The struggles that we face in the church today are about this kind of journey, breaking new ground, interpreting scriptures afresh in this generation. We need to listen for the word of God between us in all our disputes. What is life giving? What opens up new ways and understanding? We cannot stand on the outside. We need to be prepared to lose and find ourselves and seek the creative purposes of God in the space between us, especially with those with whom we profoundly disagree. That is where God's life and community is formed – bringing life to the dark spaces in our relationships as well as the colourful ones.

Saint Ignatius found a way of reading scripture that led him further into the life of God. Ignatian spirituality encourages us to use scripture, and particularly the encounters of Jesus in

the Gospels to allow the life of God to enter into us and touch us in prayer. By imagining ourselves into the gospel passage and an encounter with Jesus the scripture touches us at a deep level, in the dark as well as the colourful places of our lives and hearts; allowing us to tap into that living creative word of God.

The Week of Accompanied Prayer that we will be running at the start of Lent next year, will be using this form of prayer, as those taking part have the chance to share their experience with a prayer companion to help discern the living word of God in their lives. Sometimes we need the help of others to give birth to the life of God within us. We hope that as many of us as possible will be able to take part in that week and that it will help us as we discern the purposes of God for our lives and the life of this church.

An encounter with Jesus, the living word of God changes us, as a community and as individuals - moves, shapes us and leads us on new paths to new understanding. As we are inspired today to reflect on scripture and use it to develop all our relationships, especially those with whom we are estranged or at loggerheads, and our own spiritual lives, let's find a way to enter into and be absorbed by his word...so that it sparks the life in us, draws us together as a community so that his purposes may be fulfilled in us...

*So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth  
It shall not return to me empty  
But it shall accomplish that which I purpose  
And succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*