

## **Bible Sunday 2019**

At the beginning of last week Julie and I had a short break in the Polish city of Krakow. Apart from being a beautiful city it is famous for having housed the factory of Oskar Schindler who saved about 1200 Jews from the death camps – the subject of the film “Schindler’s List”. During our time in Krakow we visited the 15<sup>th</sup> century synagogue where some of those 1200 Jews would have worshipped. At the far end of the synagogue there was an exquisite, decorated curtain covering the ark which contained the Torah – the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures. And next to the curtain a light was burning. It was a moving sight and reminded me of the verse from Psalm 119: “Your word is a lantern to my feet and a light upon my path”.

And seeing the light and the curtain before the Torah also took me back to the words of Miles Smith who was one of the translators of the 1611 Authorised Version of the Bible. He said this: “Translation it is that openeth the window to let in the light...that putteth aside the curtain that we may look into the most holy place.” And this image of putting aside the curtain also refers to the tearing of the Temple curtain from top to bottom following the death of Jesus. In a very striking way Miles Smith aligns the work of a Bible translator with the work of Jesus who tore down the barriers that separate us from God.

The translator's role, he suggests is to open up the way so that we might see – see the glory of God revealed in the word. The whole point of putting the vernacular scriptures into the hands of ordinary people for translators like Miles Smith was that people might see Jesus revealed through the written word of the Bible.

And this is something we also see being acted out in today's Gospel reading. The action takes place in the synagogue, on the Sabbath, using the scriptures. It is meant to confirm for us that all that Jesus says and does is rooted in Judaism. The synagogue services themselves would have been fairly informal consisting of prayers, Bible reading followed by a commentary and the giving of alms for the poor. All this would have been led by laity. And so Jesus was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah to read – a passage which both announces the coming of the Messiah and the signs that reveal his presence – hope for the poor, freedom for the oppressed and sight for the blind. And at the close of the reading Jesus says: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing". Jesus uses scripture here to reveal his true identity to friends, family and neighbours in Nazareth.

And this is important. The synagogue was the institutional heart of Judaism which has been called a religion of the book. And the reverence given to the Torah in the synagogues I visited last week bears witness to this. But Jesus uses the authority of the scriptures to point to himself. And one reason the OT was retained by the early church was because they found in Moses and all the prophets the revelation of the death and resurrection of Jesus. And this revelation of Jesus becomes even clearer with the NT. It is the word made flesh who is revealed in the gospels. It is the experience of the Risen and exalted Christ working through the early church to which the epistles and other NT writings bear witness. And this cumulative witness to Jesus led Bishop Michael Ramsey to conclude that Christianity is not like Judaism, a religion of the book, but the religion of a person - Jesus. So today, which we keep as Bible Sunday, is not about giving thanks for the word on the written page but about giving thanks for the way the word of scripture leads us to see Jesus – the Word made flesh.

But we must move on from seeing to searching. In his preface to the Authorised Version Miles Smith goes on to talk about the provisional nature of all translations including the King James version. Translation, he says, is an approximate art and there will never, therefore, be a definitive version of the

Bible. Instead we will always need different versions. And Augustine, many centuries before, saw the provisionality of these different versions as a virtue rather than a drawback. “The variety of translations”, he said, “is profitable for finding out the sense of the scriptures”.

And the implication behind Augustine’s words is that the meaning and sense of scripture is not obvious or straightforward. We see this acted out again in today’s gospel reading. The people of Nazareth were physically present with Jesus in the synagogue and could see and hear him face to face. But when he used the scriptures to enlarge their vision of who he was and what his mission was they couldn’t grasp or understand what he was saying. In fact, in the verses that follow today’s passage the people of Nazareth are so blinded by rage and prejudice that they tried to hurl Jesus off a cliff. And if it was difficult for them to find Jesus in the words of scripture when he was there before them explaining things how much more difficult it is for us with different sources, translations and a multiplicity of interpretations. Sayings will inevitably be hidden from our sight.

But oddly I think this is part of the divine economy for us. We are told to worship God with all our heart and with all our

*mind*. To receive the truth of scripture will require the use of our minds through study, thought and prayer. Rather than focussing on a few favourite passages it means soaking ourselves in the whole of scripture and searching for the Lord in order to discover what he is saying to us in our contemporary culture. It won't be given to us on a plate – we will have to search in order to see.

But we are not meant to be on our own in this process of searching and sifting. The work of searching the scriptures is something we are to do as a community. From the earliest days of Christianity, the scriptures were read during worship as part of the church's praise of God and of the Church's longing to draw strength and inspiration from Jesus. One of the unforeseen effects of the translation of the Bible into the vernacular at the Reformation, just at the time when the printing press was invented, was the privatisation of the scriptures. The Bible came into the hands of people in their own homes. Yet, this idea of a solitary reader sitting alone at home with a pocket Bible would have been quite alien to the Christians of previous generations. Instead they would have read and studied the scriptures together not only listening to their contemporaries but also listening to the voices of Christians from the past as they searched for the word of Christ.

So, on this Bible Sunday let us celebrate not the words of the Bible themselves but the way those words can lead us to Jesus. But let us also be aware that recognising Jesus in the scriptures is not always straightforward. We are called to search diligently and to search together if we are to find in them the Living water of Jesus. For Miles Smith not only compares translation to letting in the light and putting aside the curtain. He says it is also about removing the cover of the well that we may come to the water – the living water whose source is Jesus. To whom be all honour and glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and for ever. Amen.

I am indebted to Rowan Williams for some of the thinking that informed this sermon.