

## Bible Sunday

Psalms 1

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Matthew 22:34-end

Part way round a lovely country walk I came across a hand written note on a field gate. "You must have your dog on a lead." It said. I had to go back. I didn't have a dog.

Interesting advice on a packet of tablets the other day. "Keep away from children."

I heard of a guy thrown out of job interview before it had even started. He went to the toilet just before hand, as you would. In the Gents, he looked at the urinal and there was a notice on it saying "out of order. Please use floor below"...

David's back from holiday and you don't know whether to laugh or cry.

A young lad with learning difficulties was on a car park roof with a gun in his hand. An older guy he looked up to had sort of helped him through life, but also helped him get into thuggish violent burglary. A policeman shouted across "Give me the gun." The older guy said "let him have it..."

The young man fired. He was hanged for it.

How we interpret each other's language can be as hilarious as it is tragic. Certainly it matters. As we celebrate Bible Sunday, how we interpret Biblical language matters, or should matter, about as much as anything at all in our life as people of prayer.

When someone shouts a line of scripture in order to excuse anti-Semitism or racism, or sexism or militarism, surely God who's Spirit breathed through the writers of Scripture that we may bear fruitful lives does not know whether to laugh or cry.

Our funny or tragic misunderstandings, and even the careless writing of ambiguous signs, illustrate just how agile we normally are about what and how we read and how context changes meaning. It is important, if we love God with all our soul, our heart and our mind, that keep all three alert as we read the scripture we claim S/he inspired.

They are evocative words. Jesus was not being at all original when he responded to the Pharisees' question about which is the most important commandment. Phrases just like his were already in wide circulation. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind." In another Gospel "strength" is added. Perhaps he said that, too, one time.

**Heart**, such a resilient term our medical knowledge has not been able to undo. In fact it needn't. We may know the right brain is more the source of feeling, but we alighted on heart long ago with good reason. Cognitive information is the last thing to inform us what's going on. The first thing to listen to in any moment if you want to know what's going on is your body. Think how the heart leaps when your beloved comes into the room, before you've even admitted to yourself that she or he is indeed the one you've fallen in love with. So, even taking into account our magnificent mind-

knowledge of that organ's function, **heart** is still a powerful poetic word for the seat of our feelings, commitments and knowledge of how we are – no, how we really are.

**Soul:** again, whatever our culture or creed we need a resilient word like soul to describe that which is receptive to the numinous; that which has the capacity to behold beauty and tragedy; that which enables us to hold the fact of our mortality with the possibilities of eternity.

Yet not these alone, Jesus and the other Hebrew teachers say: **mind**, too. That which so brilliantly gathers information, analyses it and – here's the clever human part - forms questions. The mind does not debase the feeling of the heart and the yearning of the soul. Rather, the more information it gathers, the more our wonder deepens and so the heart leaps yet more.

Jesus breaks the rules of the quiz giving a second answer, as do his forebears, but what is startling about Jesus' brief poetic answer is the little linking phrase between the two commands: "The second is like it." To love your neighbour is like loving God. To love yourself is like loving God. To love God is like loving yourself. To love yourself and God is like loving your neighbour. All the law and the prophets hang on these. All that literature. All those texts open to hilarious and tragic misinterpretation.

I doubt if, when the Psalmist wrote what we now call Psalm 1 they knew they were writing Holy Scripture. They wanted to write a good song to honour God and maybe teach a thing or two; one memorable enough for Sabbath School; one stern enough to warn a wayward adult; one joyous enough to lift a persecuted soul.

Applying the mind, it's delightful to notice it begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and ends with the last, giving a satisfying sense of completeness. Soon, though, nudged by heart and soul, the mind forms a question. "It's not so simple is it? Why do so many bad people prosper?" That is a question of the heart and soul, formulated and delivered by the mind. In fact the editors feel the same, so you only have to wait until psalm 2 before the poems start darkly to dig around in there.

Back to 1 then, and we notice the beginning and ending with the wicked puts in central place the glittering image of a river nourishing a tree bearing its fruit in due season. We can enjoy questions like "Is he *too* grumpy about the wicked? Does it show he's a bit fascinated by them?" Good questions, but not if they're only used as an excuse to dismiss the poem and not let it work on our own heart. If he is so, that should help *us* reflect on our own fascination with evil, with bad news, with others' misfortune. Our mind is busy, and that is good. This is poetry, though. Let's breathe. Let it work on the heart and soul, too. Look at the tree, how slowly it grows. Think of the moving river. How much water wastefully passes by. How little the tree needs from it. How it imbibes the water secretly. How active is its patience, bearing fruit for others' benefit "in due season." The river is the law of the Lord. The mind hears the word "law" and quickly thinks "all those regulations about sentencing, about taxes, about health and safety with axe heads and animal welfare? Just how refreshing can all that be?" But the soul says, "hold on, all those things matter because they are the stuff of daily life, but the Law includes the Pentateuch. Remember, mind, you keep that sort of information. The First five books of the Bible include mythical poetry of creation and flood; then the great family saga of our origins and exile and exodus. There's law in the pedantic sense and much, much more."

We can thank the soul for reminding us of this and realise how many kinds of literature there are and of what styles in just those first five books. If we were talking films, you could say Genesis is all Spielberg with special effects galore. Exodus is Charlton Heston, Sophia Loren, epic and clear. By Joshua, Quentin Tarrantino has got hold of it, relishing the violence, but with worrying emotional intelligence. Numbers describes many of the same events as Exodus but with a bit more Danny Boyle, or even Stephen King.

We are normally agile in reading different kinds of text, or genres of art, recognising irony and accepting the power of similes while not fixing them too firmly down so as to ruin them. If we can do so in our cultural life, we need to do so also, no, *especially* when we read the astonishingly diverse idioms of what our community of faith has bound into its library, its **Bible** of texts we call sacred.

I doubt if St Paul thought, when he wrote his nearly grumpy, but ultimately encouraging letter to the Thessalonians, that he was writing sacred Scripture. He did think it inspired by the Spirit in some way. It was the only way he could make sense of his life. We know it is a letter, so our mind whirrs with thoughts of who it's for, when it was written and what it's replying to. We can enjoy exploring all that with the help of commentators. There are powerful clues in the text about motivation which can stay hint he mind, our analysis being all about Paul and his first readers, or we can open heart and soul to let those phrases about flattery, greed, and trust to help us test our motives in the way we speak to and email each other. In this clearly politicised letter, arising from some misunderstanding, or trying to head off more misunderstanding, we can feel the physical distance between these people. In its politics there is real tenderness. Paul talks of giving their "own selves" to this little church community, at great personal risk. Our reading years later is scrambled by a tradition of selectively misquoting Paul for the purposes of upholding patriarchal prejudices, so we assume he's a sexist. If we can ask the mind to hold that thought but park it to one side for a moment, we are suddenly free to feel the wonder and tenderness of the poetic imagery supposed-sexist Paul chooses to describe that self-giving: a nurse breast feeding her children. So, he understands what giving of self that physical, primeval, female gift involves, then. He honours it. All the politics builds to the words "you have become very dear to us."

With heart, soul and mind engaged, we can be moved by this fragment of scripture to think of who we should be writing to, who we have misheard, who cares for us like that and who we care for like that. Stepping back a little, noticing that this odd letter, this fragment of conversation has been included in the scriptures at all is rather wonderful. For we live in our own fractious communities. We don't want a bunch of do-gooding letters and instructions showing how it should all be perfect. We want, when we open heart soul and mind to God, to find reality, and some creative literature that can help us see the tragi-comedy of our misreading our own reality.

Here are three fragments of Scripture, not chosen particularly for Bible Sunday, but continuing our reading of Matthew through this year. Reading them consciously on a day when we celebrate the gift of scripture, they can help us see why we bother with terms like **Holy Scripture**, even as our mind has legitimate questions about what that means. For me, to stand when we are about to hear the Gospel is an expression of expectation: a bodily preparation helping get the heart soul and mind into a receptive state of being. To read together, with a certain formality, and respond even to puzzling scripture with a phrase like "This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God" is not to take it

all at some shallow surface literalist reading. Quite the opposite. It is to say “my heart, soul and mind are open and interacting as I fully expect that, by attending to this text I will learn something about God and humanity.” What we learn will vary hugely according to our context, and the kind of literature it is within the dazzling array of the Bible.

I describe briefly in this week’s recipes the experience of abiding with scriptures during a Sabbatical. I wonder if some of the best ever Bible attending has been done by you during the enforced sabbatical of this weird year; some of the most unselfconscious reading; some of the most worshipful waiting. On sabbatical I did have companions, in the form of commentaries and writers and painters, so I did feel I was attending in community in some way. Reading alone can leave one with worrying questions that we need others to help us with. I hope our weekly worship is one key to that, making the ecology of the river bank rich and healthy, so to speak. Of course you are entitled to regard my cooking as self-indulgent. I do want to affirm, though, I think it was more than a parallel, more than a metaphor: it was training for attentiveness to scripture. I say that not to justify myself, but to say that your solitary study and your equivalent, attentive self-care – be it cooking, or anything else – is not merely self-indulgent. It is part of what it means to love your neighbour and to love God. Even if the fruit cannot be enjoyed by others much until well into next year, hear how in Jesus’ heart, soul and mind they interact: love God, love neighbour, love self.

Much of God’s life giving Word will rush by us like the stream (like the interesting bit about David in this week’s Gospel – another time...) but we each draw what we can. We need to abide, to put ourselves in the circumstances in which that nourishment is likely to happen, actively waiting, and the fruit will unselfconsciously be born in our lives for others’ benefit in years to come.