

Sermon for Fourth after Trinity, 2021

Ezekiel 2:1-7. Colossians 3:12-17. Psalm 37:1-6.
John 4:31-38.

The Collect: Lead us, Lord, with thy most gracious favour, and further us with thy continual help; that in all our works, begun, continued, and ended in thee, we may glorify thy holy Name, and finally by thy mercy obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Colossians 3:16 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly...'

During the week I watched a short video of a Messianic Rabbi talking with a Jewish Rabbi seated next to the Western Wall (the 'Wailing Wall') in Jerusalem. They started discussing what the scriptures say about the person and role of the Messiah. A few years ago, during an exhibition of Biblical Artefacts in Romford, a woman approached me with a gift. She gave me a scroll of the Torah in Hebrew, that she kept in a drawer at home. They rarely got it out as they had to wear an head covering when handling it, and say some prayers. But, rather than leave it in a drawer she would like me to have it as a token of appreciation for the way we Gentiles were teaching the importance of Jewish Culture. On reflection, I should have asked her to keep the Scroll, and perhaps offer to show her how this Old(er) Testament, was the foundation of the New. She hadn't read either. The Messianic Rabbi at the Western Wall was using the Old(er) Testament to introduce the 'non-Messianic' Rabbi to verses wherein the name of Jesus/Yeshua was clear. One of the verses he used was Psalm 2:12 'Kiss the Son lest he be angry'. Another was Proverbs 30:4 'What is His name, and what is the name of His Son, - surely you know?'

But, if you look in Psalm 2 at the back of our Green Prayer Book, you won't see the words I just wrote above. Why not? Furthermore, as a Gentile Christian, you might not consider this to be quite as provocative as it would seem to an Orthodox Jew. There are numerous verses of this nature, particularly bearing on the identity of the Messiah, that have been glossed over; even hidden or removed from some Jewish texts in order not to prompt reflection about Jesus/Yeshua's claim to the title of Messiah. The reaction of some of the Orthodox to the scripturally-based evangelism of Messianic evangelists can be very antagonistic, and sometimes violently robust. Indeed there is an anti-missionary organisation whose sole purpose is to combat Christian outreach, for the designation 'Christian' implies Gentile to them. That is a serious mistake.

However, the Holy Spirit can enliven the heart of any reader of the Bible. When God speaks through it we should expect to hear his voice. If you have never felt that He has 'spoken' to you whilst hearing or reading scripture, then you have to ask why not? Doesn't everyone want to have an encounter with the Living Word using the written word? Sadly, the answer is that the Bible is probably the most owned and least read of all books. For many secularised Jews and Gentiles there is little hunger for God. They are distracted by the glittering baubles of the world, not entranced by the precious pearls of the Word. We can see from events in Hong Kong that politicians are ruthless in suppressing the media. It can subvert their own philosophy. In several countries religious authorities persecute anyone found with copies of the Bible. Words contain power, and 'the pen is mightier than the sword.' (Edward Bulwer-Lytton, 1839, play about Cardinal Richelieu).

Though the majority of the population in Israel would not seem to be outwardly religious, there is less resistance to talking about spiritual matters than might be seen in our own society. This is possibly because there is a visible minority of men dedicated to studying most days in the Yeshiva, the religious school. Jewish Society has been influenced by book-based discussions. A student answers a question about a rabbinic commentary by posing another question. So there is a dialogue between students and rabbis, not a monologue. What a contrast that is to the way that we conduct our religious learning. A majority of those who claim to be committed to Christ rarely search for truth. They can be passive, or apathetic. How have we got to this state of affairs? Maybe because priests and ministers have been jealous of their right to instruct others, and to ensure that their expertise has to be called upon. We know how that was challenged by Bible Translators such as John Wyclif, who was reviled, dying of a stroke in 1384. Tyndale, another translator was strangled then burned in 1536 for his efforts at Biblical Translation into the vernacular.

But, St Paul tells the Colossians (mainly Gentiles), ‘Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God.’ Every Christian should learn sufficient scripture to be able to tell their story to someone who doesn’t. Nowadays the law of the land is broken by so many schools that youngsters are no longer routinely exposed to Bible teachings reinforced by godly hymns. Last week I talked about the way that a penitent life brings one closer to God and counters horizontal (worldly) thinking. Today our challenge is to repent of the sin of sloth, namely, holding scripture in such low esteem as to let it stagnate and gather dust on a shelf. To do that is to hold the Holy Spirit in equally low esteem. It’s as if He has nothing to teach us, nothing that we would want to know or need to hear. That needs to be repented of. Our own carelessness should not be a stumbling block before God. Perhaps saying this is how the Colossians admonished each other? By repentance we can say sorry to God that we have failed to pay attention to Him. We can let His Word become part of our day, every day, including Sundays. We can start to grow, not wither.

Here’s a way to repent: by prayer:

Lord, I repent of my failure to seek you in the Bible. I have neglected to open your gift of the Holy Scriptures to me. I have preferred to listen to the world. Lord, please forgive me for the sins of sloth and presumption that I know enough, for which I now repent. Help me to commit myself afresh to you by being determined to seek your Word for me, my family, and the church, not just on Sundays but everyday. I ask this in the name of the Word made flesh, Jesus our Lord. Amen.

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.