

Your rector's letter

Dear friends,

At the end of this month – 29 October – we celebrate **Bible Sunday**. This is traditionally the nearest Sunday to Reformation Day, 31 October. This year it will be exactly 500 years that on 31st of this month Martin Luther announced his 95 theses which mainly criticised the practice of indulgences in the church. Martin Luther's theology was based on Scripture and he encouraged people to read and study the Bible. In this letter, I'd like to explore the Bible's significance for humankind, for Christians, Jews and all who seek God.

The blessing of the lectionary?

The Church of England and many other churches such as the Roman Catholic Church make use of a Lectionary. This allows for the reading of the most important passages from the Old and New Testament at the Sunday service within a span of three years.

Some passages are lesser known or even difficult to understand and to explain. But that's precisely why we have a lectionary. If we would have to choose the readings every Sunday, the choice would probably be very restricted. We would easily go for the popular well-known extracts and always forget about the more mysterious pages of Scripture.

To illustrate that it is often tempting not to follow the allocated readings from the lectionary I'd like to refer to the first Sunday of August this year. That day saw the festival of the transfiguration of the Lord. As it was first Sunday we also organised All Together Service for families. Transfiguration is not an easy theme for a family service. But should we keep quiet about the Transfiguration at a family service and only read the parts of the Bible that are easy to explain? If so, this stance may also exclude the Good Friday readings and even the resurrection narratives at Easter.

The Bible, an optimistic book

There are several ways of reading and studying the bible. In my training for priesthood I was introduced to the historical-critical method. This way of exploring the Bible takes into account that the Scriptures are written in different periods, by different authors, for different audiences, in a variety of styles and genres, and for diverse reasons. But despite this diversity all Bible books can be described as a way of God talking to people, through events, prayers, songs, stories,... All the events that are described in the Bible are an opportunity for the author to speak about God, his relationship with his people and his promise to remain with them until the end and beyond. All pages of the Bible, in different genres, languages and styles, bring a message of trust and faith in God. There is a belief that human history is closely linked with God's project of salvation. Historical events are described as signs of God's care for his people, as part of his saving plan. Some scholars consider this approach as the origin of modern history writing. The Judeo-Christian approach to human history is an optimistic one. The succession of events is considered as a positive development, as progress that leads to its ultimate goal, which is the establishment of God's Kingdom of love and peace in the world.

When history seems to go wrong

This optimistic understanding in the Scriptures is not blind to setbacks in history. Some events such as the Second World War or terrorist attacks are clear obstacles in

making progress. Nevertheless, the Jewish perspective sees a slow but irreversible development in history that will lead to a world of peace and love, God's Kingdom, a renewed creation.

By the way, as I mention here God's creation, it seems to me that the first pages of the book of Genesis did not primarily intend to tell us about the past – how everything started – but rather how the world and the universe will end in God's plan. The goal of our endeavours in human history should be a world that very much looks like Paradise, the Garden of Eden. In the 65th chapter the prophet Isaiah describes a perfect creation: the wolf and lamb shall feed together and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. It is a vision of our goal and destination: a perfect world, the Kingdom of God.

God's rule and human action

There is one major issue in this view on human history. This approach could lead to the misunderstanding that God dictates history, that all events are the result of God's will, that our strivings have no influence at all, or even worse that we shouldn't try to steer history in a specific direction as finally God has all power to lead us where he wants us to be. This conclusion is wrong. We are constantly reminded in Scripture how much human action is part of making progress. Indeed we humans can make a difference.

The book of Acts, for example, which is in many respects a history book, describes how human initiatives changed the communities where faith in Christ was proclaimed. The initiatives undertaken by Paul resulted in many conversions and would lead to the spreading of the gospel of love in the then Western world. But not only Paul's actions are mentioned, there are other people such as Peter, Timothy, Barnabas, who all contribute to the development of local history, which will prove to be the beginning of a global movement. The book of Acts describes history in the making.

All this helps us to discover our own mission as messengers of the Good News. We can make history; we can make a difference.

And where is God in all this? Does he just leave it to us and can he only watch our actions? From history, also recent history, we've learned that if history-making is left in the hands of humans only, it often leads to war and intolerance. Therefore God remains at people's side, not to take over, but to inspire them. But if people shut themselves off from God's spirit, if they are not open to his message, their actions could be worthless or even worse – they could create a real setback in the progress of human history. It is indeed a matter of accepting God's guidance in our lives, in full awareness that God has given us the freedom to refuse his guidance. But history teaches us that without God's inspiration things can turn very nasty. So we pray that this generation may remain open to God's spirit, that we let Him guide us, so that our actions may lead to a better world, a new creation, God's Kingdom of love and peace.

Erwin