

Bible Sunday, Year B

Isaiah 55.1-11 • Psalm 19.7-14 • 2 Timothy 3.14-4.5 • John 5.36b-47

St Luke's, Chelsea

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Sam Hole

As I hear our readings each Sunday morning I have a great sadness. For I regret deeply that we never hear some of the stories from the Old Testament that we might remember most vividly from childhood. Remember Joseph with his coat of many colours being sold off to slavery because his brothers couldn't cope any longer with how much more their father loved him? Or Moses meeting God at the burning bush, and taking his shoes off because he was walking on holy ground? Or Daniel and his companions thrown into the lions' den, yet remaining unharmed? These are stories of struggle and faithfulness that you'll find beautifully illustrated in most children's Bibles – and yet, the lectionary that sets the readings we hear each Sunday doesn't let us ever hear these particular stories.

But as we may also be well aware, the Old Testament can also bring us to scratch our heads, and sometimes to shake it. What are we to make, we may ask, of the moment where Lot's daughters get him drunk so they can sleep with him and bear children (Genesis 19)? How about Balaam the talking donkey, a figure who seems more out of a Shrek film than the Bible (Numbers 22.21-39)?¹ Or, more darkly, the moment when the Israelite leader Jephthah vows to sacrifice whoever he sees first if God will give his army victory – and as he comes home the first person to come out of the house is his daughter (Judges 11.30-40)?

This Sunday is Bible Sunday. It is a Sunday when we are offered a chance to reflect on the significance of the Bible in our faith. But what our readings today particularly invite us to consider – and this is the question I would like to focus on – is the continuing significance of the Old Testament to us. That question is perhaps in part one of how to make faithful sense of the more challenging stories in those books. But it is, most particularly, a question of how we Christians can faithfully read the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament writings, and all they testify to in the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

¹ Or the moment when the prophet Elisha is walking into a town, when a group of boys came up to him and make fun of his baldness – at which point two bears come out of the woods and maul the boys (2 Kings 2.23-24)?

And we may first say that the Old Testament remains, firmly, holy scripture. Our reading from 2 Timothy contains a line you might hear trotted out in more fundamentalist circles to argue that the New Testament itself is literally true. 2 Timothy 3.16: 'All scripture is inspired by God'. But of course Paul here isn't commenting on the New Testament, which didn't exist when he wrote these words. He's telling his readers about the enduring importance of the Jewish scriptures, that we now call the Old Testament. 'All scripture', he writes, 'is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.' The message to the early Christians is clear: keep pondering the Old Testament. It contains deep truths about God. In the second century a thinker named Marcion took the opposite line and declared that the gods of the Old and New Testaments were fundamentally different. Other theologians quickly agreed this view was not faithful to the witness of Christ's life. Marcionism was condemned. So here is a first rule to guide us: we are not Marcionites. The Old Testament is inspired by the God of Abraham who is incarnate in Jesus Christ; it is a wellspring of life.

And yet, we may secondly say, as Christians we are committed that the Old Testament remains true, but also that is not the whole story. In other words, only to read it would be a bit like forever re-reading volume one of *The Lord of the Rings* without getting to the climax of the story. And this is to hold together two things. On the one hand, we believe that God remains faithful to his covenant to the Jewish people that we see in Abraham, Moses and David. We are not, in other words, supercessionists who believe that Christianity has entirely superceded Judaism. But, at the same time, we hold that the witness of Christ brings us to read the Old Testament differently. This is what's going on in today's gospel reading, in which Jesus is debating with the Jewish leaders about the basis for his authority. The Torah itself – the writings of Moses – point to his coming, says Jesus. A repeated theme of the gospel is the refusal of the Jewish leaders to accept this. But, of course, this is what the earliest Christians held to be true, as they re-read the Old Testament and discovered in it a new way of reading, with a story that would eventually culminate in Christ. For a sign of this difference, remember that Christians both have their own name for these writings – the Old Testament – and arrange them differently from the Jewish Tanakh. While the Jewish Bible ends with 2 Chronicles, and the return from exile, our Old Testament places the prophetic writings at the end. We heighten the sense of a question posed by the prophets, to which Jesus proves to be the answer.² So here is our second rule: we are not supercessionist, but we also recognise that Christian reading of the Old Testament is different from the Jewish reading of those scriptures.

² Think also of the bidding we hear at the start of each year's service of Nine Lessons and Carols: 'Let us read and mark in Holy Scripture the tale of the loving purposes of God from the first days of our disobedience unto the glorious Redemption brought us by this Holy Child.' Quoted in John Barton, *A History of the Bible*, p.311

But, finally, to be Christian is to be committed that the Bible is not the be-all-and-end-all of our faith. Holy words are written in that book. But, as the start of John's gospel puts it, 'In the beginning was the Word.' The living word is Christ. And that's what we see too in today's gospel: 'you do not', says Jesus to his accusers, 'have [God's] word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent' (John 5.38). We need the words of Holy Scripture. But these are signs that point us to God incarnate, by whose Spirit we know life.

So we have three guardrails. We are, first, not Marcionite: we hold to the truth of the God revealed in the Old Testament. Second, we are not supercessionist: we are both committed to God's ongoing covenant with his chosen people *and* affirm that Christian reading of the Old Testament is done in the light of Christ and so is different from Jewish reading. Third, we ask that the whole Bible may point us to the living word, Christ, that the spirit of God may live in us.

So we do well to continue to ponder the Old Testament. It offers us themes of Christian faith which are not so explicitly or memorably developed in the New. The Old gives us those epic narratives of exile and return – from Egypt to the Promised Land, and to Babylon and back again – that are fundamental to our own story of earthly exile succeeded by our return to God.

And perhaps with regard to those challenging passages in the Old Testament I may offer three reflections. First, the Old paints in more graphic narrative detail than anywhere in the New – other than perhaps the crucifixion – the consequences of human evil. That is vividly depicted in the jealousy of Joseph's brothers, the actions of Lot's daughters, and the thoughtlessness of Jephthah. Second, the Old Testament paints in shades of grey *and* glorious technicolour the stories of the heroes of our faith, with all their weaknesses and failings: the humanness of characters such as Abraham, Moses, and David. And finally, the Old Testament contains the ever-present God's repeated declaration of his love for his chosen people, even if in ways we may sometimes need to work to decode today. So it is a great pity that we do not hear so many of the seminal stories from those books. Read in the light of Christ, the Old Testament points us to our humanity and God's sovereignty – and to the divine love that burnt then, and burns us fiercely for us today.

A prayer of Saint Jerome, who in the fourth century created the Vulgate translation of the Bible into Latin: Lord, you have given us your word for a light to shine upon our path: grant us to meditate upon that word and to follow its teaching, that we may find in it the light which shines more and more to the perfect day. Amen.