

James 1:19-27

Matthew 7:24-29

Today we are looking at how to use scripture – but before we do that, let's just recap a bit and talk again about the fundamental question of why we read the bible at all? I am one of those people who would say that the reason that I am a Christian is that it is true. How do I know that – because the bible tells me that it is. And there is a second reason why I am a Christian – and that is because over the years I have developed a living relationship with God, the father, Son and Holy Spirit – and how have I done that, initially through my reading of the bible. So, how does that work?

Many people say that God has never spoken to them, but I believe that God speaks to us each and every time that we read our bibles – but we do need to learn how to recognise that. There is rarely a booming voice coming from the heavens with a message for us; God is much more subtle than that – he just plants a thought, or a verse in our hearts, which have come to us because of what we have just read in our bibles. It is through God speaking to me through the bible, and my answering him in my prayers, that my relationship with him has developed. That is why I believe it is so important that we must make every effort to regularly read our bibles.

You know, there isn't just one way to use scripture, there isn't just one way for us to read our bibles. Many people follow daily reading plans, organisations like the Bible Reading Fellowship, Scripture Union and Waverley Abbey have produced reading plans for many years and that helps many people to regularly read their bibles. All those of us who have been ordained into the Church of England, as part of our ordination promises, commit to following daily prayer programmes which include bible readings from the plan called the lectionary. Others choose to read and study a book of the bible over a certain length of time. The ways of regularly reading our bibles are many, and in a few minutes I shall talk about the plan that we are encouraging you to follow over the next year.

But before that let's take a look at our first bible reading this morning from the letter of James, and consider what God is saying to us through that passage, and perhaps where it may take us when we may have a bit more time to look at the whole letter than we do on a Sunday morning.

Behind our learning from this reading there may be a number of things which influence us:

First, this letter may be a favourite of ours, or we may know little about it. I love the letter of James – I always see it as one of those books of the bible that really teaches us to put our faith into action, as we shall see here, but that may not be how you see this book.

Second, perhaps we might wonder who James was? One thing that is common over many books of the bible is that there are two things that we are unsure about – who wrote it and when it was written. In this case there is one thing that we are pretty sure about and that is that the letter was written by the James who was the leader of the early church in Jerusalem. But who was he? There have been some who suggested he was James the brother of John, two of the original disciples, but as James was the first of the apostles to be martyred, he was beheaded on the orders of Herod Agrippa the first in AD 40, that was well before any of the New Testament scriptures were written. After considering alternatives we come to James, who is called the brother of Jesus, but to what extent he was an actual brother, or just a very close friend and colleague, is another whole investigation for another day.

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Finally, we might wonder how it got included in the New Testament. One thing I can say is that Martin Luther, the great 16<sup>th</sup> century reformer, tried his best to have it removed: it was one of a number of epistles that in his German translation of the bible were grouped together as “secondary books”. It is in his Preface to the New Testament that he says, after advocating the value of those books which he did value, “In comparison with these, the epistle of James is an epistle full of straw, because it contains nothing evangelical.” When we come to read this book in full we shall look at Luther’s complaints more.

So, in this case in trying to discover what God is saying to us through this passage I went to the modern translation of the bible called the Message – which again, I shall come back to later. This is what the middle section of that passage says from the Message: “Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. Act on what you hear! Those who hear and don't act are like those who glance in the mirror, walk away, and two minutes later have no idea who they are, what they look like.

But whoever catches a glimpse of the revealed counsel of God - the free life! - even out of the corner of his eye, and sticks with it, is no distracted scatterbrain but a man or woman of action. That person will find delight and affirmation in the action”.

This passage gives us a real idea of how we should use the scriptures. First, we read them, then sometimes we read them again, possibly in a different translation, as we make sure we understand them. But that is not the end. If the reading from the scriptures is telling us something, if God is speaking to us through the Scriptures, then we must act on what we are hearing. And this is the key point – reading our bibles is just the beginning: taking notice of what they are saying to us and acting upon that is even more important.

But how can we understand the bible better so that we can take this action. As I said, reading different versions from your normal bible can help and one which I do find The Message particularly helpful. And we can learn a lot from its translator and why he created it. Eugene Peterson was originally a teacher of the biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek in a theological seminary. But then, as he puts it, his life took a sudden vocational turn to pastoring in a congregation. What he discovered there concerned him. In the Preface to the Reader at the beginning of The Message he says this:

“I was now plunged into quite a different world. The first noticeable difference was that nobody seemed to care much about the Bible, which so recently people had been paying me to teach them. Many of the people I worked with now knew virtually nothing about it, had never read it, and weren't interested in learning. Many others had spent years reading it but for them it had gone flat through familiarity, reduced to clichés. Bored, they dropped it. And there weren't many people in between. Very few were interested in what I considered my primary work, getting the words of the Bible into their heads and hearts, getting the message lived. They found newspapers and magazines, videos and pulp fiction more to their taste.

Meanwhile I had taken on as my life work the responsibility of getting these very people to listen, really listen, to the message in this book. I knew I had my work cut out for me.

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I lived in two language worlds, the world of the Bible and the world of Today. I had always assumed they were the same world. But these people didn't see it that way. So out of necessity I became a "translator" (although I wouldn't have called it that then), daily standing on the border between two worlds, getting the language of the Bible that God used to create and save us, heal and bless us, judge and rule over us, into the language of today that we use to chat and tell stories, give directions and do business, sing songs and talk to our children."

Eugene Peterson obviously found himself in a very difficult position in his church, and I am not suggesting that our churches are the same as what he found – but what I am saying is that if we are not careful, and do not make proper use of the scriptures, it is all too easy for us to slip into the sort of situation that he talks about. If we really want to build our faith, get closer to God, then we must be so careful not to build our houses on sand as we heard in our gospel reading – the rock on which we build our houses must be the Bible. And then we must find all the ways that we can to help us to understand what the bible is saying.

But having encouraged you to read the bible, is it really a good idea to try to read it cover to cover? Well, there are a number of reasons why we are encouraging you to do just that (although we are mixing up the order in which we read it):

First, we want to do something together; we want to read the same parts of the bible at the same time; we want to be able to encourage each other in our endeavours; we want to be able to share those parts that we find encouraging or enlightening or hard to understand, or even difficult to believe, so that we can move forward in our churches together.

Second, we all know various parts of the bible, various stories, perhaps some of the Psalms, but do we know how they all fit together? Do we know enough about who might have been the author of the book we are reading, and when it was written, and what was going on when it was written, to understand the context in which it was written? Do we know what type of a book it is – is it poetry, history, prophecy, or what? Without at least some of this information passages can be hard to understand; passages about women in church, slavery, divorce, human sexuality and there will be others. By reading the whole bible, with the background information we shall give you and the opportunity to ask questions, we can begin to advance our understanding of areas like these.

Third, at a time when we are looking forward to coming out of the various lockdowns, we shall be thinking about our churches and how we can build them up in what will almost certainly be a very different world. And what better book is there to act as a guide to how we should build our churches than the bible – and particularly the New Testament where we learn how the first Christian churches were formed. And there is guidance on the building of the church all over the New Testament, hence the importance of reading it all.

So, let me explain how the next year is going to work. You should either have received, or will receive in the next day or two, a pack to help you start – if not do please let me know. It contains three things:

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first a letter explaining the whole project, second a booklet which has details of what you should be reading when – and each week there are five sets of readings rather than seven so that if for some reason you cannot do your readings on one or two days, you don't get behind, and third it contains an introduction to the four books that we shall be at least starting to read in the first month.

At the end of each month, we shall get together, possibly in several groups, to share what we have enjoyed and been encouraged by, what we have learned, and to talk about what has challenged us. I am so looking forward to when those meetings can be in person, but the first few will almost certainly have to be on Zoom. As far as we have got to in our date planning for these meetings is included in the booklet.

In Month 1 we are reading Mark's gospel, and nearly all of Genesis, we shall read some Psalms, and the near the end of the month start to read Galatians. So I shall finish this morning with examples of the sort of tips, or the sort of resources, we can share with each other to help our understanding of the bible.

First on Galatians, or Paul's letter to the Galatians to give it its full title, when you read it imagine receiving a letter from the person who founded your church but has since moved on to plant churches elsewhere. Would you be concerned as to what was coming in the letter? Would you be nervous before having the letter read to you? When you read this letter, put yourself in their shoes and see how you feel. And make some notes of how you felt so you can share that with others.

Second, on the Psalms. Many of you will know of a man called Bono, who is the lead singer of the rock band U2. You may not know that Bono is a committed Christian. Over the years after the publishing of the Message, Bono established what many would see as an unlikely friendship with Eugene Peterson, the translator of the Message. If you put into the search box of YouTube Eugene Peterson Bono Psalms you will find a short film (just over 20 minutes) talking about how they became friends, and then discussing the Psalms, and particularly the U2 song 40 which is based on Psalm 40. I found their conversation fascinating. If you can't find it let me know.

And this all starts on this Wednesday – Ash Wednesday. So, find somewhere comfortable to read each day's passages, give yourself a minute or so before you start, to ask God to speak to you through the Scriptures, and then, see what happens.

Shall we pray. Heavenly Father, as we as a church embark on reading the bible in a year, will you be with us, will you encourage us, will you particularly help us in passages we find hard, and will you, through your scriptures, talk to us, and highlight to us those passages through which you want us to learn each day. And then, as we come together each month to share what we have read about, give us the courage to share what is on our hearts with those who we are with. Amen