

Hebrews 4:12-15

Luke 4:1-13

Many years ago, a little girl lived with her mother in a small grey stone cottage in the Welsh countryside. Her father was a weaver who worked very hard to support his family but sadly he died when she was young.

Mary Jones knew what was expected of a nine-year-old girl. Without grumbling, she would do her share of the chores around her home.

On Sunday mornings, Mary dressed in her Sunday best, would walk to the little chapel in the village two miles away. At the front, the minister would open a large, black, leather-bound book. As he began to read, Mary would marvel at the wonderful words and store them up in her heart. 'Oh, how I wish I could read this book for myself, or even have one for my own!'

Then, one Sunday morning, the minister, announced that a school was to open in the village. Mary was excited. 'Now I can learn to read,' she said. Mary worked extra hard to finish her chores quickly so that she could go to Mr Evans, the schoolmaster's, house to learn to read.

Months passed until at last Mary was asked to read from the chapel Bible one Sunday morning. She read perfectly. After the service, Mary rushed up to her mother. 'I must have a Bible; I must have a Bible!' Her mother gently placed her hand on her shoulder. 'But Mary, Bibles are expensive, and we haven't much money.'

'I know, that's why I am going to save up for one, and I don't care how long it takes me. I'll do jobs for other people; I'll do anything just to have my own Bible.'

And that is exactly what Mary did. For six long years she saved all she could until the day came when she had enough money to buy a Bible. Mr Evans had told her that there was a man in a town called Bala who had a number of Bibles. Mary, now fifteen, told her mother that she was going to walk to Bala.

'Mary, that's nearly twenty-five miles away!' But there was no changing her mind and she set off early one morning, and by the end of the day she arrived in Bala, where she searched for a man called Mr Charles who had the bibles. After knocking on several doors and asking for directions, she found his house. As Mr Charles opened the door, Mary made her request for a Bible, the words tumbling over themselves in her eagerness: 'I've walked twenty-five miles to get here, I've saved up for six years to buy a Bible, I've got the money here, you can count it if you like – please can I have a Bible?'

Mr Charles was taken aback. 'You had better come in and tell me all about it, but first you must have something to eat'. After she had eaten, Mary told Mr Charles everything. He was moved by her account. And he held out to her a brand-new Bible. Mary stared at it for a long moment before taking it with both hands. Then she expressed her heartfelt thanks.

The next morning, Mary, clutching her treasured possession, said goodbye to Mr Charles and started on her way home. She arrived to a grand reception. Everyone was cheering and wanted Mary to show them her Bible. As she held the book up for all to see, she murmured a few quiet words. 'Thank you, Jesus, thank you Mr Charles,' she said.

Luke 4:1-13

Why did Mary go to such efforts to get a bible? This morning I want to explore why anyone would do just that, and to consider what makes this book so powerful?

So, what is in this book? Well, the first thing to say is that it is full of great stories, but the stories are not just good stories – although there are some absolute crackers in here. Let's start with the Old Testament. This is a kind of history of the Jewish people as Angela explained last week – and what is so special about that – the Jews were God's chosen people. This book has the story of how God made his promises to his people (the bible calls them covenants): how he promised to a man called Abraham that his descendants would be God's chosen people; how he gave the laws that these people must follow to a man called Moses and how he led his people to the land that they would inherit. And there are other ongoing stories like the creation of, and the journey of, the arc of the covenant – the box that God instructed Moses how to create and contained the slabs of stone on which God had written the 10 commandments.

The Old Testament also contains something else which is quite remarkable – it contains a whole series of predictions about what would happen in the future – prophecies we call them. And how do we know that those prophecies would come true – because they already have done. Prophets in the old testament predicted all sorts of things, not least the fall of the Jewish nation itself. They predicted that the Jewish nation would split into two – into Israel and Judah, the Northern and Southern kingdoms – and they predicted that the Kings of these countries would eventually lead the countries to their demise (In Isaiah 39 we read: Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the Lord of hosts: Days are coming when all that is in your house, and that which your ancestors have stored up until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left, says the Lord.") – and by 587 BCE both Israel and Judah had collapsed and were under the control of the Babylonian empire.

But before you say, "Well that doesn't make it a very powerful book then – that's all just doom and gloom", there were two other predictions that give this book its power.

First, in Ezekiel chapter 37 the Lord shows how the Jewish nation would rise again. This chapter tells us about the valley of the dry bones. After some discussion the Lord explains it's meaning to Ezekiel: 'Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.' – saying that the people of God would rise again – as they did in 515BCE.

But the most remarkable prophecies in the Old Testament are those concerning the coming of Jesus: there are something like 55 different prophecies in the Old Testament about Jesus covering his birth, his ministry, his death and resurrection and his role in the church. These could form a sermon series or a bible study course all by themselves, but to quote a few:

In Isaiah 7 (perhaps the most familiar): Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

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From Daniel 7: "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed".

From Zechariah 9: "Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey".

From Psalm 22, talking about the crucifixion of Jesus: "They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment".

Here lies some of the power of this book – it tells you what has happened, it tells you what is going to happen, and then, later, it tells you that what it said was going to happen, did happen. And of course, Jesus himself prophesied about many things including his own death and resurrection and the fall of the temple in Jerusalem in AD70 and the cycle went on.

Another example of the power of this book come from our gospel reading this morning; the story of how the devil, Satan tried to convince Jesus that he should give up following and worshipping God, but should worship him instead, and it is worth spending a minute or two looking a bit closer at this confrontation. How did Jesus rebuff those advances – by quoting this book back at Satan three times.

The first temptation raises questions of God's care and provision – Satan says, "If you are the Son of God, (suggesting that as such Jesus has the power to act on his own) command this stone to become a loaf of bread." But for Jesus to take action independent from God would have represented a lack of faith in God's goodness, so he went to Deuteronomy 8 v3 and responded with: 'one does not live by bread alone' or, to put it another way, as important as food is, it is not as important as being sustained by the word of God.

Moving to the second temptation Satan said, "To you I will give their glory (that is the glory of all the kingdoms of the world) and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." This is Satan's invitation to engage in false worship. The devil's offer is deception at its best, a half-truth. Though he does have great power he does not have the authority to offer Jesus everything. The offer itself reflects extreme self-delusion on Satan's part: Satan is inviting Jesus to grab power, but to do so and renounce God would be to possess destructive power – and ultimately would mean possessing no power at all. So, Jesus again goes to the book of Deuteronomy – chapter 6 v13 – which says, "Worship the Lord your God and him only. "

Finally, Satan took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Here Satan was going to the Scriptures and quoting from Psalm 91 to make it appear that taking a leap would be perfectly orthodox.

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Again, Satan plans a private test of God's faithfulness. But Jesus refuses to test God's provision by insisting on a miracle – that would be showing a complete lack of faith in God. So, for a third time Jesus goes to the book of Deuteronomy (chapter 6 v 16) and puts the devil in his place: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'

Jesus had defeated the devil, for the time being at least, by using the scriptures to defeat the devil's arguments, by recognising the importance of using God's power only in the proper place and in the proper way. And this power is in this book.

But then of course there's more in this book when we go further into the New Testament. The story of Jesus' life as told in the gospels has to rank as the most remarkable story of all time. And this is another real power moment. I've lost count of the number of times that people, in telling their stories of how they came to faith, have said, "I picked up a bible and read the gospel according to, whichever one, and I realised the truth of what I was reading, and my life was transformed. In the gospels – and indeed later in the book of Acts and the epistles, we hear of many miracles performed by Jesus and his followers. This book only covers the early years of what we now call the Christian church, but that doesn't mean that what happened in those days stopped at the end of the book. There are many books written since then which tell of modern-day miracles, but without people reading, studying, and believing this book and its power, those miracles would not happen.

But there is a final point I want to make here – and that is the power that this book has for you and me today. There is something about the bible which means that on many occasions, when I have not known what to do about something in my life, whilst doing my regular bible readings, the answer has jumped out at me. These situations tend to be very personal, and I believe should remain so, but believe you me, they happen. This book allows God to speak to me, and to you. It is through this book, through the power of this book, that God speaks to us today.

But let me finish by returning to Mary Jones and her bible.

After Mary had returned home, Mr Charles sat in his study and remembered how the young girl had disappeared over the brow of a hill still holding the new Bible to her chest. He began to think of all the other Mary Joneses who must be wanting Bibles, not only in Wales but in England, Scotland, Ireland, and even in other more distant lands.

In 1804, the British and Foreign Bible Society was formed by Thomas Charles in response to needs which stories like that of Mary Jones had brought to light. For over 200 years Bible Society has been working to bring the Bible to life; to help people around the world engage with it, relate to it, and make sense of it. To understand its power. May we follow the example of Mary Jones in reading, and loving, this book.

Amen