

Psalm 19:7-14**Mark 7:7-13****Introduction**

Nicky Gumble who runs the Alpha Course at Holy Trinity Brompton tells a story that I might get some details wrong because my memory is hazy but the essence is of a young man who was in prison. Someone gave him a New Testament to read. He was delighted because he realized that the size and quality of the pages was just right for rolling spliffs. So he tore out the pages one at a time, rolled a smoke and enjoyed it. He smoked his way through Matthew, Mark and Luke but when he got to John he thought that he might as well find out what it was all about and began to read. As he read he encountered Jesus and gave his life to him. His life was transformed and he was able to make a new start with the help of Christian friends.

When he was given the New Testament he thought it had no value. He wasn't interested in its content but found it useful. But as he read it he realized how very valuable it was because it has the power to change lives. It changed his life

King David knew the value of God's word and in psalm 19, he extols its virtues. The first half of the psalm tells us how creation speaks of God and proclaims him to the world that he has created and then, from verse seven he, focuses on God's word. He describes it as being more precious than pure gold and sweeter than honey.

At home I have about fifteen Bibles that I have owned over the years. Many of them are extremely tatty because I have read them and used them so much that they have fallen apart. Yet I cannot bring myself to throw them out because I value them. They are very important to me and it feels absolutely wrong to throw them away. I have been fortunate from my early Christian years to have known people who loved and valued the Bible and taught me to do the same. As a young Christian I was encouraged to memorise verses of the Bible and to learn where to find helpful passages. That has been one of the most useful things I have ever done because it means that at certain times of need, when I might be feeling alone, or discouraged, or afraid, or uncertain I can call to mind a verse from the Bible

Psalm 19:7-14**Mark7:7-13**

that speaks to me, encourages me or challenges me and helps me in whatever situation I find myself. The Bible has been the foundation on which my Christian life has been built and as such it has great value to me and I love it.

The psalm describes God's word in different ways that include 'Law', 'Statutes', 'Precepts', 'Commands' and 'Ordinances'. What is referred to here is the revelation of God's will to his people, as found in the books of Moses, the prophets and the history of God's dealings with the Israelites. It describes it in different ways such as perfect, trustworthy, right, radiant, pure and sure. It gives a prevailing sense that engaging with God's Torah is life giving communion with God, the receiving of his creative and saving word.

It describes the effects of God's word on the life of the believer as reviving the soul, making wise the simple, giving joy to the heart, giving light to the eyes and enduring forever. In my experience it does all of those things because it is in the words of the writer to the Hebrews it is *"living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."*

The Bible is not simply good literature. Because it is inspired by God it has a power of its own that enables its words to speak straight into our hearts and change us from the inside out. So it can revive our soul. It does that in two ways in renewing our soul and giving us spiritual life through Christ and it also strengthens our faith and our relationship with God when that is weak and weary.

It also has the power to make us wise. It is full of first class teaching and wisdom that teaches us and if taken seriously transforms us and our understanding of life, of God and ourselves. It enlightens us and enables us to see things in a new light and shows us the way to live.

Psalm 19:7-14**Mark 7:7-13**

Usually when I am talking to young parents who want their Babies baptised I ask them why they want their child to join the Christian Church and the answer very often is that they want their child to grow up within a moral framework and that the Christian framework gives them the best foundation for life. And of course that framework is found here – in the Bible. It begins with the Ten Commandments which form the basis of the covenant between God and his people. They are rules for life that enable an individual not just to live a 'good moral life' but to live a life with God at its very centre. *"You shall love the Lord you God and have no other Gods before him."*

As we shall find when we begin to read the whole Bible this year those ten basic commands are built upon and supported by many other rules for life that govern the whole of the structure of the life of the people of Israel. The rules cover moral behaviour, public health, private health, worship, behaviour towards our neighbours and our enemies and the structure to uphold a civilized society.

The religious life of the people of Israel was based around sacrificial worship and observance of the law. The problem was they were not able to do that. They found they couldn't keep the law and they continually turned away from worshipping God. The Pharisees built up a whole raft of supporting laws and instructions which were meant to make it easier to please God

In contrast to the two commands of Christ, the Pharisees had developed a system of 613 laws, 365 negative commands and 248 positive laws... By the time Christ came it had produced a heartless, cold, and arrogant brand of righteousness. As such, it contained at least ten tragic flaws.

New laws continually needed to be invented for new situations. Accountability to God was replaced by accountability to men. It reduced a person's ability to personally discern. It created a judgmental spirit.

Psalm 19:7-14

Mark 7:7-13

The Pharisees confused personal preferences with divine law.
It produced inconsistencies.
It created a false standard of righteousness.
It became a burden to the Jews.
It was strictly external.
It was rejected by Christ.

It was this perverted understanding of God's law that caused the continual friction between Jesus and the religious leaders. He told them during one of their encounters that they neither knew God nor the power of scripture and in today's Gospel reading we see him quoting scripture and then berating them:

*in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.'*

⁸ You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

⁹ Then he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!

What upsets Jesus so much is that they have taken the very law that was meant to make us value and care for our parents and added in a sub clause that enabled them, under the pretext of piety and offering to God, to avoid any responsibility for caring for their parents.

This twisting of scripture and manipulation of its meaning is a far cry from psalm 19 where the psalmist says:

*"the ordinances of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.*

*¹⁰ More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;"*

The psalmist knows the value of God's word to transform us and help us to grow in faith and righteousness.

Psalm 19:7-14

Mark 7:7-13

I mentioned earlier that one of the things I value about scripture is that within these pages are words that help us in every human situation and dilemma. I have often found when I am afraid or anxious that reading Isaiah 43

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm
you;

Or Psalm 91

Those who love me, I will deliver;

I will protect those who know my name.

¹⁵ When they call to me, I will answer them;

I will be with them in trouble,

I will rescue them and honour them.

Has brought me help and comfort and new strength to follow
my Lord.

When I first became ill in the early eighties I went through a very black time. Nobody knew or understood ME then. Eminent physicians couldn't work out what was wrong with me. I was very ill but nobody knew why. I found myself living in a body that didn't behave as it should and I didn't recognise myself. I spent a long time examining my heart to see if I had committed some sin I was being punished for and during that time God felt a very long way away. It was at that point that I read Psalm 139 as one of my daily readings

Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

⁸ *If I ascend to heaven, you are there;*

if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

⁹ *If I take the wings of the morning*

and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

¹⁰ *even there your hand shall lead me,*

and your right hand shall hold me fast.
¹¹ *If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"*
¹² *even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.*

The words spoke directly to my heart and reassured me that even at the bottom of the pit God was there with me and would help me.

You see the main value of this book is that as we read it regularly, day by day, it speaks to us. David mentioned last week that whilst reading in morning prayer a while ago we had both shouted with laughter because the words on the page spoke into the very situation we had been discussing.

This happens again and again. If we include reading the Bible as part of our daily routine we will regularly meet with God. We may read a passage that we have read twenty times before and it hasn't touched us but on that particular occasion it speaks clearly to us: reviving our soul, making us wise, giving joy to the heart, giving light to the eyes. As we read it speaks to our hearts and informs us and changes us. That is why it is so valuable and so powerful.

I cannot recommend enough the practice of daily reading God's word to us. It doesn't need to take hours but if we read it regularly we will find it speaking to us and changing us in the way it spoke to that young man I mentioned at the beginning.

I am sorry to repeat myself but am going to leave you with the words of Mahatma Ghandi I read to you two weeks ago:

"You Christians look after a document containing enough dynamite to blow all civilisation to pieces, turn the world upside down, and bring peace to a battle torn planet. But you treat it as though it is nothing more than a piece of literature.

Readings
Psalm 19:7-14
Mark 7:7-13

The Value of Scripture

Live stream –Fowlmere

My prayer is that as we begin to read the Bible regularly many of us will find it speaks to us will and learn to value God's word to us in Scripture.