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Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : Bible Sunday ~ October 29, 2017

This time last year, I was involved with a day workshop which gave a group of young people aged 16 to 25 the opportunity to explore what God might be calling them to do, to discover their “Call to Faith”. It was a moving privilege to be with these young people in the final worship as they squatted on the carpet together, praying with candles and in silence at the end of their day. It was evident that many of them had felt a call to Christian service through words spoken to them from the Bible – and that image – of young people reflecting on their Life Call – is perhaps not a bad place to start as we celebrate Bible Sunday today. At the end of our Gospel reading are these prophetic words of Jesus “Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will never pass away”. Well thankfully heaven and earth are still here – just – and so are the words of Jesus, surviving for over 2,000 turbulent years of humanity’s history. And that is something to celebrate. The fact that the Bible is still the most read book in the world, the fact that people can access it in all sorts of new ways through modern technology, is a real cause for celebration today. There is so much that we can gain from our study of the Bible. I give two examples this morning:

The first is as we think of St Luke, whose feast day fell earlier this month. It is, of course, to Luke, a Gentile, that we owe the beautifully written Gospel of Luke, and the Book of Acts. He was a Greek physician, a disciple of St Paul, a companion on some of his missionary journeys, and an inspired writer. Luke’s Gospel focuses on the compassion of Christ. His gospel contains some of the most moving parables, such as the Good Samaritan and Prodigal Son. This, with his emphasis on poverty, prayer and purity of heart, make up much of his appeal to the Gentiles, for whom he wrote. Women figure more prominently in Luke’s gospel than any other: look out for the extended story of the Virgin Birth, and stories of Mary, Elizabeth, and the woman who was a sinner. In Acts, Luke is remarkably good at linking sacred and secular history. A principal theme of Acts is how the early Christians moved away from Jerusalem into the pagan world, and especially onto Rome. Luke is the patron saint of doctors, surgeons and artists (apparently due to his picturesque style of

writing). His symbol is an ox, sometimes explained by reference to the sacrifice in the Temple at the beginning of his Gospel. That is just one example of the way in which one who wrote part of the Bible expressed something of his own characteristic and life.

The second example where we can gain much from the teachings of the Bible is on the question of angels. Do we believe in angels? Does each of us really have a guardian angel? Well I would want to say a resounding 'yes' – and certainly many who would not particularly regard themselves as Christian will often refer to their Guardian Angel taking care of them when some crisis falls. The existence of angels is suggested in various Old Testament texts. The teaching of Jesus encourages us to believe in guardian angels. He once said, recorded in Matthew chapter 18 verse 10, 'See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven,' and the early Christians accepted their existence and work as Luke records it in Acts 12/15. It is not just in the Bible that we learn of angels. In England, devotion to the angels, both in Anglo-Saxon times and later, was strong. In modern times, the great American evangelist Billy Graham, has written an entire book on the existence and work of angels. Medieval writers described them as intercessors; Herbert, Bishop of Norwich (d 1119) specially praised them, and his contemporary, Reginald of Canterbury, wrote prayers in their honour. Another spiritual leader of the same period confirmed the existing belief of the time by declaring that each human soul is entrusted to the particular care of a single angel, who protects both body and soul and offers prayers to God. For many centuries Christians have celebrated the feast of St Michael and all Angels, a month ago today.

Those are just two examples where the Bible helps us as we explore our Christian Faith. Today, on this Bible Sunday, we celebrate the Bible, the Word of God, as handed down to us. We are, in the words of Paul to the Church in Colossae, "thankful as we clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. And above all we put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. We must let the message of Christ dwell among us richly as we teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in our hearts".

Someone has written these words as a short commentary on our Gospel passage used today: “In our Gospel reading, we can reflect that some 2,000 times, the fig trees have come into leaf, showing that summer is approaching, since Jesus spoke those words to his friends. The ancient words of scripture were first spoken and written in a particular time and place. But through an ongoing process of translation, reading, interpretation, discussion and reflection, they have spoken afresh to every generation and they still speak to us today. There is little else in our world that is so everlasting and yet dynamic, so utterly consistent and always fresh.”

So we give thanks for the Bible. We give thanks that we have such a rich treasury on which we can base our lives of faith and which can be our companion on the journey.

But we also need to remember one truth: to be truly effective, the Bible needs to be used and read. People sometimes proudly show me a treasured bible they own, which is in absolute pristine condition – and which has clearly never been used or read.

It was Charles Spurgeon, an English Baptist preacher who said: **“A Bible that’s falling apart usually belongs to someone who isn’t.”** Amen!