

1. Why read the Bible? If you followed Richard Dawkins', the celebrated atheist and author of the best-seller *The God Delusion*, you wouldn't!

In that book, he wrote, *'There are two ways that Scripture might be a source of morals or rules for living. One is by direct instruction, for example through the Ten Commandments..... The other is by example: God, or some other biblical character, might serve as – to use the contemporary jargon – a role model. Both scriptural routes, if followed through religiously.... encourage a system of morals which any civilised modern person, whether religious or not, would find – I can put it no more gently – obnoxious.'* Is he right? If so, let's pack up now!

2. Maybe we don't feel as strongly as Richard Dawkins (I hope not!)

But we might have a less vitriolic attitude to the Bible, even if unconscious. We might find it irrelevant to our daily life, and just a tool which chaplains and vicars use to give motivational talks each week from the pulpit! Why would I spend some time, each day or from time to time, reading the Bible, we might ask? There is too much to get on with, I cannot connect with it, it's too far removed from my issues here and now.

There have been times I have felt a bit like that. I have seen statistics which suggest even quite a few church ministers might not be in the regular habit of reading the Bible, apart from service preparation. But I want to encourage you today, on Bible Sunday, to understand the Bible as being something which, if read wisely, thoughtfully and humbly, can literally change our lives. I want to reflect on our readings today which show us how to read the Bible well.

3. We read the second part of Psalm 19 today.

It is one of David's better-known psalms in which he celebrates arriving at a good place in his life and reflects back on what has brought him there. It actually starts (v.1, not the part we read today): ***'The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.'***

David has contemplated the incredible creation around him and in these reflections, has seen the hand of God at work. But he then moves on to the second part we read today, in which he focuses on what he has learnt from the Scriptures (v.7-9): ***'The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring for ever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'***

He has seen two sources (creation, the Scriptures) which have inspired him to relate with God more deeply, which have enabled him to grow and be transformed (with bumps along the way – David was a very messy person!) into the person he was always made to be, who God called him to be, his truest self. But notice where he ends (v.14): ***'Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.'*** There is a sound of humility here, of deep learning, of understanding his true place in the created order. His reading – of creation and the Scriptures – has led to his transformation.

But there can be a risk when we read just the words we heard today: 'The Law of the Lord is perfect.' The word 'law' can sound like we read the Scriptures as a rule book. It's an easier trap to fall into than we might think! But we aren't called to read them as a rule book; we are called to read them to be transformed on our journey into God.

4. In Paul's second letter to Timothy, we are given a different angle. Paul is encouraging his young protégé Timothy to remain grounded in truth, as he ministers and teaches to the people around him. He warns him he will face all sorts of hostility as people who listen to him will constantly look for ways to avoid the truth, as they look for teaching which reinforces their own, existing ways and affirmation of fulfilment of their superficial desires. He comes out with some words often quoted as a reason to take the Bible seriously (3.14-17): ***'But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.'***

Of course, when Paul wrote those words, there was no New Testament. He was referring to the Jewish Scriptures (OT) and saying how they can all help Timothy learn to live a life trusting in God who has shown himself as Jesus. He is calling Timothy to read the Scriptures to be transformed on his journey into God.

5. We come to our gospel reading John. Jesus is in conflict again with the local leaders.

He has healed a man who has been unwell for years, on the Sabbath. The local religious leaders have challenged him: 'you can't do that on the Sabbath!' They think they know their Scriptures (they do, in a way!) but it is not leading to transformation (5.39-44): ***'You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life.'*** They know the Scriptures, but they don't have life. And Jesus goes to the heart of the problem as he sees it: they don't have God's love in them (v.42); they are in it for affirmation of their own egos, not God's life (v.44).

These readings all point us to the same goal: read the Scripture for your transformation, not to reinforce your own ego, not to hear your own existing views yet again re-affirmed in some self-fulfilling cycle. Robert Mulholland, a Biblical scholar and university teacher, in explaining how to read the Bible, wrote: *'In informational reading we seek to grasp the control, to master the text. In transformational reading, the intent is to allow the text to master you.'* We are called to read the Bible contemplatively, reflectively, approaching it with a sense of wanting to grow in God's love and see how God might be calling us to be transformed on that journey.

6. Much of my life I have struggled to read the Bible, primarily because I have felt uninspired by it, find it too removed from my context, too, maybe, 'archaic.' But I was trying to read it in the wrong way. I was reading it as information, rather than as a route to transformation. There are numerous ways out there to engage with the Bible. Each way might be more appealing to some, less appealing to others. Some more meditative, some more imaginative, some more narrative. Please do talk to me if you want to know more! Ultimately, Jesus says, the difference will be how you approach it. He says read it with love, humility, a desire for transformation.

Let me return to where I started, quoting the famous New Atheist Richard Dawkins. He was a biologist at Oxford University who has really advanced understanding in genetics and evolution. But a friend of ours, raised a secular atheist Jew, who also worked in the biology faculty at Oxford, found Dawkins' opinions on religion and God somewhat jarring. He didn't feel Dawkins was bringing the same scientific rigour to his views on religion as he was to his study of biology. And he found the way he presented the views a bit exaggerated and hysterical. So our friend decided, as a secular atheist Jew himself, to do his own study of religion and the Bible. He has an inquiring mind. That friend is now a Franciscan and Anglican priest. He approached reading the Bible very differently to Richard Dawkins!