

***Texts that linger* – Isaiah 55: 6-11 Luke 4: 16-24**
Sermon for Bible Sunday 27/10/19, preached at
8.00 & 11.00 at Christ Church and 9.30 at Good Shepherd

For those who like quotation games, ‘Bible or Shakespeare?’ is a must. So many familiar English phrases owe their origins to Shakespeare, and even more to the King James Version of the Bible – but can you tell them apart? Here are three to try:

- Bible or Shakespeare? ‘How the mighty have fallen’ [2 *Samuel 1: 25 – David, on Saul’s death*]
- Bible or Shakespeare? ‘Beware jealousy, the green-eyed monster’ [*Othello: 3, 2 – Iago to Othello*]
- Bible or Shakespeare? ‘The writing on the wall’ [*Daniel 5: 5 – Balshazzar’s feast*]

Phrases and verses from the Bible stick in the mind and can be quoted unexpectedly. Karl Marx is not someone you’d normally turn to for lessons in Scripture, but a verse we heard this morning – Isaiah 55: 8 – provided him with *mots justes*: ‘My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways are my ways’. It’s an appeal to people to have a rethink. Karl Marx was writing about the 1840s when landowners were buying up large areas of woodland. They couldn’t understand why other people felt they could walk onto their land and help themselves to firewood. To the landowners this was an infringement of their property rights. To the poor, this was the only thing that saved them from cold and hunger. Marx said to the landowners: ‘Your ways are not my ways, and my thoughts are not your thoughts.’ It’s a very long way from the world of Isaiah, but it does sound like the God of Israel.

Talking of having a rethink, listen to Isaiah 43: 18-19, which says, ‘Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?’ This verse struck powerful chords for preachers of the American Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. They had, of course, long made use of the Exodus narrative to inspire resistance to slavery and oppression, and hope for a new and brighter future. Now, Martin Luther King and others within the movement, spoke to their own people to let go of ‘slave mentality’, not to live with resentment or a sense of entitlement, but to embrace the freedom that is God’s gift. ‘Remember not the former things, [for] I am doing a new thing.’ Old words had new life.

‘Texts that linger, words that explode’ is the title of a book by American scholar Walter Brueggemann about the Old Testament prophets. The idea applies to the whole Bible. The two examples I’ve used are from his book, and are in the public sphere. Many of us will have known something similar at a personal level. I remember when I first read through the whole of Genesis being absolutely bowled over by verse 6 of chapter 15: ‘Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord credited it to him as righteousness.’ Suddenly, for me quite out of the blue, Old and New Testaments connected and cohered as I’d never seen before – faith a kind of ligament holding all together. I didn’t realise then what good company I was in: Martin Luther, St Augustine, and St Paul, no less, had got there before! But for me a verse I’d read before without seeing special significance suddenly exploded with meaning.

We know the Bible's explosive power when a verse suddenly shouts at us, touching the very thing that was on our minds, giving reassurance in our worries, direction in our perplexity, or a kick up the backside in our complacency. The word of God lives!

The text lingers: the Bible remains the world's number one best seller. It needs to be read! I am sure we all also find that difficult – difficult to understand, at times; difficult to apply, at times; difficult to concentrate on, all too often. The very familiarity breeds, if not contempt, then at least a wandering mind. We have to work, to persist, to gird our loins (a good Biblical phrase) if we are to linger long enough with the text for the words to explode.

How do we do so? Regularity matters. Schedule time in your daily schedule to read the Bible. Have a clear reading plan, your own or a published one. Use Bible reading notes – Joy can advise – or longer commentaries. Listen to it read in church. (It was written to be read out loud.) Engage with sermons as preachers engage with texts. Sing it – sung words stick better. Pray it – speak God's words back to God. Variety matters as well. Use different techniques. Sometimes read long passages (even whole books) to get overall sense. Wrestle with problem passages: don't just give up on them. Mull over a single verse in your mind as if you're sucking a sweet. *Lectio Divina* is re-reading a short passage and in silence seeking a single word or phrase of consequence.

Ignatian meditation imagines yourself into a Biblical scene or story and sees the sights, hears the sounds, smells the odours and feels the emotions as if you were there.

Food is very good (and Biblical) analogy. The word of God is our spiritual nutrition. As Isaiah says, 'As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, so is my word that goes out from my mouth.' As water causes seed to bud and germinate, sprout and grow, flower and be fruitful, so the word will accomplish God's purpose within and among us. Don't treat it with dull literalness but engage your imagination (with some discipline). Chew on it, and let it come to life.

This brings us to a set of issues that are certainly bothersome to some. We say, 'This is the word of the Lord' after our Bible readings, but many ask, 'Is it?' Can we really say this is the word that issues forth from God's mouth? Don't we know that there were human authors who wrote it all down? And surely it doesn't read like a word for word dictation from on high? Personally, I am very happy saying 'this is the word of the Lord' and understanding it as the word of man (or possibly woman). Jesus, whom we talk of as the living word of God, was and is both human and divine – fully human and fully divine – so surely this is our starting point for understanding the written word – accepted by the church through the ages as fully word of God and studied by scholars as fully human writings. In my experience it can be as we draw together the human tools of scholarship with the church's faith that the words come to life and bring life.

Let's end by going back to New Testament Galilee, to Nazareth, Jesus' hometown. It's the Sabbath day, and he comes to the synagogue, and he's given to read the Isaiah scroll (dating from the 6th century BC). He opens it at the place that speaks of the Spirit's anointing of the Messiah, who will preach good news and bring healing and release and freedom. So he reads, but then stops abruptly before the next line: his lips would not proclaim 'the day of vengeance of our God'. Instead, he sits down, all eyes fixed on him. 'Today,' he says, 'this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.' And a text that has lingered for 5 centuries explodes into new life.