

TJW, HT, 15.3.09, 9.15am & 11am,

2 Timothy 3:14-17

Our values no.2: everyone growing in Christ

I wonder how you would finish these sentences - all to do with our attitudes to the Bible.

“I struggle to get to grips with the Bible, because...”

“I love the Bible because...”.

“I’ve never really read the Bible because...”.

And here are some different things that I sometimes hear people from within the church family say about the Bible:

“I can’t make sense of the Old Testament.”

“I’m a Christian, but I don’t get round to reading the Bible much.”

“I’m slowly reading through the whole Bible, and bits of the jigsaw are falling into place for me.”

And a final one: “I’m reading Mark’s Gospel, and Jesus is really coming alive to me.”

Now this sermon is the third in a series of sermons that are very important for us at Trinity. We’re setting out five values, which we’ve identified as crucial to who we are and what we’re about as a church family.

They’re all to do with two things: us, and Jesus Christ.

So far we’ve spoken about value number 1: ‘everyone transformed by Christ’. Then we’ve put prayer as central, with the value of ‘everyone praying through Christ.’

And, this morning, we come to our next value: ‘everyone growing in Christ’. And the one thing that sits right at the heart of this value is the Bible.

(To help you, there’s an outline of this sermon on the back of the notice-sheet.)

It’s pretty obvious to anyone who walks into Trinity that the Bible is at the centre of our church-life. We put Bibles in the pews. In our sermons we aim not to preach our own ideas, but what God says in the Bible.

Here’s why. When the Bible talks about how to know God, how to live as a Christian - how to keep going as a Christian - it says this: the one thing you really need is the Bible.

We can’t deepen a friendship with someone without spending time listening to what they’ve got to say.

And we can’t grow in faith and knowledge and love of Christ without growing in the Bible - because the Bible is Christ’s words to us.

So turn with me to one of the great sections in the Bible which describes about the Bible - 2 Timothy chapter 3.

This letter was written to a man called Timothy who felt exactly the same way many of us feel about being a Christian: nervous about being able to keep going as faithful Christians - unsure if he’s got what it takes to stay faithful to Christ when things get tough.

I know that some of us often feel that way: not sure we've grown enough - or ever can grow enough - as believers, to be strong for Christ over the long haul.

And the apostle Paul wrote this letter to Timothy to show him how to stay strong - and God's preserved it in the Bible so that it can have the same effect on us.

Now the great thing about this letter is what Paul doesn't say. He doesn't say: "Look, Tim. Get a grip. Buck your ideas up."

This isn't like a football manager's half-time team-talk, where all he can say is: "Just get out there and do better in the second half!".

Instead, he says: "Remember Christ" - do you see that at the end of chapter 2, in verse 8 [READ 2.8a].

And as we get into chapter 3, he says: "remember God's Word to you in the Bible - remember what it can do for you". Look over at 3.12 [READ 3.12-15].

"As for you, Timothy", says Paul, "continue in what you've been taught, and what you're convinced of."

That's how to keep growing in Christ.

And where do we find these things that we've been taught and have become convinced of? We find them in the Bible - the Holy Scriptures.

And just in these few verses Paul teaches us two things about the Bible, which show why it's central to our value of having everyone growing in Christ. He teaches us what the Bible is - and what the Bible is for.

So first: **What is the Bible? The Bible is God speaking.**

Verse 16 of chapter 3 is the most famous verse in the Bible about the Bible. Just listen to these first five words [READ v.16a].

What that is telling you is simply this: the Bible is God's words. It's words were breathed out by him.

My words right now are carried on my breath to you - and with the Bible, its words are words spoken out by God.

If I write you an e-mail, or send you a text, those words really are me speaking to you. The words of the Bible really are God speaking to us.

Of course we've got to interpret what the Bible says - and do it properly. Each verse in the Bible is not a separate private message from God to you - we've got to understand it in its context - its context in the Bible, and in history, so that we can hear what God is really saying.

Now before we go any further there are two issues that we've got to clear up. The first is a small one. At the time when Paul wrote this letter, and used the word 'Scripture' here in verse 16, the New Testament exactly as we now have it hadn't been fully put together. So, historically speaking, he was talking mainly about the Old Testament. However, there's plenty of teaching in the New Testament which shows that the New Testament is just as much on the same level of 'Holy Scripture' as the Old Testament. So for us it's right to apply this verse to the whole Bible, as we have it.

The other issue is this: What we're talking about here is often called 'the inspiration of Scripture'. And the Bible is often called 'the inspired word of God'.

Indeed, some older English versions of the Bible translated v.16 that way: "all Scripture is inspired..."

The problem is: 'inspired' can be a misleading word.

Here's what I mean. I did German at school - and then went on to study it at university. Lots of people who have to learn German hate it - it's full of fiddly rules that make it seem complicated. (Apparently Germans like lots of rules!) But I enjoyed German, because I had a superb, inspiring teacher.

He inspired me to do much better than I could have ever done on my own.

But that's NOT what we're talking about when we say that the Bible is "God's inspired word".

We're not saying that he breathed a bit of his inspiration into the people who wrote it, so that what they said was a bit more spiritual than what they could have written on their own.

No. The Bible being 'inspired' by God means that he exhaled it all - he breathed it all out - it all comes from him. He worked through the people who wrote it. He didn't turn them into robots - but he made sure that what they wrote was exactly what he wanted to say.

Here's what that means:

when you're reading the Bible, or listening to it read out - you're having an encounter with God, speaking to you.

Two big lessons flow out of that for us.

The first is about attitude. The second is about expectation.

First: attitude. What should our attitude be when we encounter the Bible - hearing it read and preached in church? reading it in Home Group, or at home?

It should be the same attitude that we must have to God: humble, loving, submissive learning and obeying - eager to know what God wants to say to us and do in us through his word.

My grandmother had great respect for the queen. When the family were all together at Christmas, and the queen's speech came on the TV, there had to be total silence, while we all listened respectfully.

How much more humble and loving and submissive must our attitude be when the Bible is opened, and God comes to encounter us, as he speaks?

The second lesson is about our expectation. How should we expect God to come and do his work in us, and speak to us?

Of course God can speak to us outside of the Bible.

He speaks to us through nature, through creation, showing us his power.

He sometimes prompts us and directs us through circumstances, or through a feeling we have about what we should do - and we might call that 'God speaking' to us.

There's what the New Testament calls 'prophecy', which seems to be a part of God's word applied directly to a particular situation. (And I do want to preach more about prophecy later this year.)

These things are all good gifts from God.

But all these kinds of messages from God have one thing in common - something that separates them from God's word in the Bible. That is: they all have to be tested by something else, to see if they really are from God or not. And often it's only over time that you'll really know.

That means that a Christian who expects their relationship with God to be based on these things will often feel insecure and frustrated.

But it's in the Bible that we find God's ultimate, final authoritative message. If we want to hear him speak what he most wants to say us about himself, about Christ, and about us - with no doubt that it's him speaking - then we go to the Bible.

The Bible isn't the only place God speaks - but it is the supreme place.

If we want to grow in Christ, under the power of God's authoritative word, we'll be Bible-people.

That's what the Bible is: it's God speaking. And there's a second thing about the Bible that we're taught here in 2 Timothy:

What is the Bible for?

You may know that I am not exactly "Mr DIY". I do know where the B&Q in Hinckley is, but only so I can avoid the place as much as possible.

When I do go, I see plenty of different kinds of tools there. I know what some of them are, but I don't know what most of them are for. (And actually I don't want to know!).

It's one thing for us to know what the Bible is. It's quite another thing to know what it's for. So look again at chapter 3 - right at the top, picking it up in verse 15 [READ to end of verse 17].

First, Scripture makes us wise for salvation.

The Bible is God's great rescue-story - rescuing us from sin and judgment, saving us to spend life and eternity with him - not condemned and cut off from him.

If we want to understand our salvation - to be wise about it, to grow in it - it's through the Bible that God will do that for us.

So a good question to ask when you're reading any part of the Bible is: what's this telling me about God's rescue, his salvation?

But see also that Scripture gives us that wisdom through faith in Jesus Christ, as it says here.

God opens up the treasures of Scripture most readily to those who come to it asking: what does this teach me about Jesus Christ, and how to trust him?.

The Bible won't answer every question you throw at it.

For it's all about Jesus. Every single part of the Old Testament looks forward to him, setting the scene for him. And the New Testament is all about him, and how to live in him.

Now how does God make us wise for salvation?

In two ways. First, by using the Bible to teach our minds.

That's what the 'teaching' and 'rebuking' are all about. 'Teaching' is teaching us the truth about God, and 'rebuking' means rooting out wrong beliefs about God.

What we believe in our minds about God is crucial. God doesn't make us so that we can be ignorant of him. He wants us to know.

And it's the Bible that he uses to teach us.

And God also makes us wise for salvation by using the Bible to train our lives. Back in verse 16 - 'correcting' in that verse is about rooting out wrong behaviour and attitudes. And 'training in righteousness' means putting in their place behaviour and thoughts that bring glory to God.

And the result - the great goal that God uses the Bible to reach?

That's verse 17 [READ].

Surely as a Christian that's what you want for yourself.

It doesn't mean that you'll know everything, or be able to answer every question, or always get it right.

But it does mean that, right through your life, you'll be growing in your equipment to live the way you should.

So what is the Bible, and what is it for? It's God's manual for growth in Christ, and God's tool for growth in Christ.

So, we grow in Christ by learning his word in the Bible, and living his word in our lives.

That means being committed to learning from the Bible in the large groups, here in church - and in the small groups, in Home Group.

It means having an attitude to the Bible that wants to listen and learn and obey - because that's the right attitude to have towards God.

It means starting where we are. Don't throw up your hands in despair about what you don't yet know about the Bible. But plan positively to understand the Bible better every year.