

BIBLE SUNDAY 2015 at St Mark's and St Philip's Chaddesden, Derby

When I was a little boy, my father could do no wrong in my eyes. My mother was the best in the world, and everything they said was right. Dad knew the answers to all my questions and was the best doctor in the world, just as Mum could mend any broken toy and was the best amateur actress in the world.

When I became a teenager I saw my parents from a very different perspective. They had sent me away to school and on the odd times I did see them my father seemed old, out of touch and utterly uncool. My mother was often an embarrassment and a terrible cook. It was as though they were living in a different century. Dad couldn't stand pop music and was incredibly stingy with money. Mum was no help with homework and her political views made Attila the Hun look left-wing.

But later on again, when I had learned a bit more about the world, my view changed once more. I discovered how generous my father was to those in need; I discovered my mother was a highly regarded nurse; I began to see my parents as friends; I saw Dad as a man of long experience and mature wisdom; I saw Mum as someone to respect and to rely on. As Mark Twain put it, "When I was fourteen I thought my father was an old fool. When I was twenty-one I was amazed what the old man had learned in seven years".

It seems to me that our attitude to the Bible probably changes in much the same way as our attitude to our parents. When we were little, many of us learned that everything in the Bible is absolute, literal fact: 'Gospel truth'. We were taught that we should read a bit of it every day, and believed that if we did it would help us get through life. But as we grew older, we grew bored with the small printed columns of ancient English on thin paper. Some of our friends told us that the Bible had been 'disproved' by science. Increasingly we discovered parts of it that we

couldn't help but disagree with. It all seemed a mixture of fairy tale, ethnic cleansing and heavy morality, and we put the copy we once proudly received as a Sunday School prize or Confirmation present back on the shelf to gather dust.

Today is Bible Sunday. For many years it fell on the Second Sunday in Advent; but some years ago the liturgical enforcers moved it to the Last Sunday after Trinity. Mind you – shouldn't every Sunday be a Bible Sunday? It's a day perhaps to pray about and support the work of those who translate this small library from the Hebrew and Greek into the languages people read and speak today; also those who publish and print and distribute Bibles; lots of Christians still haven't got even a Gospel in their own language. It's a day when we could pray about and support those who help others to understand and interpret the Bible – preachers and teachers and all who write books and films and websites and phone apps to help us use the Bible at home or school or church.

For all the modern translations which sell so well with their lavish photographs and diagrams and maps and clear modern English, the Bible is in fact being read less and less by Christians today. And that's a tragedy. For although it doesn't give us - it doesn't pretend to give us - the latest scientific knowledge and technical data, it does give us other things; it's often said that science tells us how, while the Bible tells us why; actually it doesn't so much tell as offer: it offers timeless and changeless insights into what it means to be human, and of God's way with human beings. For people still make love and still go to war for the same motives and with the same passions as they did in the days of Abraham. We still suffer anguish and know heartache just like David the psalmist. We still know pain and fear and happiness and hope, just as the disciples did when they gathered around Jesus. And God still loves us and cherishes us, yearns for us and weeps for us, shares in our sorrows and enters into our joys, as he did throughout all the biblical centuries.

So Bible Sunday is a day that might prompt the question: Shall we get the Bible off the shelf again? Shall we blow off the dust and read it once more? If we've never explored beyond what were Sunday School stories we probably haven't yet discovered the treasures of the whole of scripture – and see it as a friend, as a story of divine wisdom and human experience, as something to respect and to rely upon.

If you're as old as me you may remember one of the first times you saw a television – there was only one TV in the village in June 1953 when I had a day off school to watch the Coronation. Immediately after the Archbishop of Canterbury had crowned the Queen, the Moderator of the Church of Scotland presented her with a copy of the Bible, saying: “Receive this Book, the most valuable thing this world affords. This is the Royal Law. These are the lively oracles of God.” We 5-year-olds were given a miniature copy – here is mine – virtually unopened.

This Bible Sunday my plea is that we should all blow the dust off this most valuable thing, and read again the lively oracles of God. Perhaps you need to buy a modern translation; or download one. Perhaps you will be helped by a scheme of readings that breaks the Bible down into manageable chunks and notes that help explain what's going on in the passage. Why not set yourself a challenge to read a book of the Bible – perhaps begin with the shortest Gospel, St Mark.

As you read, remind yourself that the Bible is a library of 66 books - different writings, written at different times for different purposes. In the process of collecting and editing the material has become out of order and incomplete. The Old Testament includes 39 books written over a period of perhaps 1000 years. It contains laws and myths and history and prophecy and poetry and stories and arguments. It has three main uses: it contains religious and moral teaching, much of it good for its own sake; it shows the way in which God revealed himself to the Jewish people – an amazingly varied record of their experience of God and their wrestling with and interpretation of that experience; and it was the Bible of Jesus

and his early followers, forming the background of much of their way of thinking. But of course the Old Testament can't be applied uncritically to every aspect of our life today – some of its teaching is quite inappropriate because conditions have changed and our understanding of God's will has developed.

The 27 books of the New Testament were written over a period of less than 100 years, but again there are different kinds of writings – all recording the experiences, first shared by word of mouth, of those who knew Christ during his earthly life and of his presence with them in the power of his Spirit after his Resurrection – it is about the wonderful thing that God has done in Jesus Christ, which the Old Testament reached out for but which went far beyond anything that its authors had expected.

As I grew up there came a time when I was no longer bothered by the discovery that my parents were fallible. I came to accept that they didn't know the answer to everything and that sometimes I could disagree with them, even in public. I learned that what is important about parents is not that they should be some kind of walking encyclopaedia, but people of love and wisdom, of laughter and tears, of comfort and encouragement. And that's what I find in the Bible, too: not dull, encyclopaedic facts about God, but the red-blooded story of his involvement in this world, and the story of men and women touched by the finger of God, whose touch still has its ancient power. Read the Bible, carefully and prayerfully, and you will discover the most profound insights into the foundations of human living; you will discover how God deals with you and me; and in the words and the works of Jesus Christ and his first followers you will discover the true and authentic picture of what God is like and what he has done for us.