

05 Bible Sunday

Readings: Leviticus 19.1-2, 15-18; Matthew 22.34-46

“You are wrong because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God” (Mt 22.29)

Today is Bible Sunday. Here are some contributions alleged to come from religious education exams about the commandments:

- The Egyptians all drowned in the dessert. Afterwards Moses went up on Mount Cyanide to get the 10 amendments.
- The first commandment was when Eve told Adam to eat the apple.
- The seventh commandment is, ‘Thou shalt not admit adultery’.
- Jesus enunciated the Golden Rule which was, ‘Do one to others before they do one to you’.

From which we can conclude that reading the Bible carefully and accurately really matters.

On Bible Sunday we can give thanks for all those people who have taken care to transmit the Bible accurately over the years and translate it into over 2,300 languages and dialects so that nearly the whole world can read it in our own first language.

At St Martin’s we take the Bible seriously. It is read at every service and in fact our services all contain lots of quotations from the scriptures. In these scriptures we meet God both in the present and in the human experience of God across something like 1400 years over which the Bible was formed. It’s 66 Books form a ‘canon’, from the Greek word for a measuring rod, of which we can be confident and against which we can test or measure our own experience of God.

Last week I bought a new Bible. I have actually got quite a few Bibles but since I was ordained I have had one ‘working Bible’ of which I take great care but I also work it quite hard. On average my ‘working Bible’ lasts thirteen years as I am just starting the third of my ordained ministry. The Bible is important in our private devotion and study as well as in our public worship. It forms and informs us.

The Bible, like everything else, is open to misuse with terrible consequences. Throughout the Church’s history the Bible has been used and abused in support of one argument or another. We have a really good example facing us at St Martin’s in the next two weeks. Bishop Gene Robinson, America’s ‘Gay Bishop’ is speaking here on Saturday week, Fireworks Day. Some Christians are concerned the Church is acting contrary to scripture. They say the Bible clearly condemns homosexual behaviour. Other Christians say the Bible condemns a lot else that we don’t seem so bothered about so why highlight homosexuality for special treatment.

Liberals have had a lot of fun at the expense of Evangelicals. There's a letter widely circulated on the web questioning whether Leviticus 18:22 settles the matter. It asks for advice regarding other specific Biblical injunctions.

- When I burn a bull on the altar as a sacrifice, I know it creates a pleasing odour for the Lord - Lev.1:9. The problem is my neighbours. They claim the odour is not pleasing to them. Should I smite them?
- I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?
- Lev. 25:44 states that I may indeed possess slaves, both male and female, provided they are purchased from neighbouring nations. An American friend of mine claims that this applies to Mexicans, but not Canadians. Can you clarify? Why can't I own Canadians?
- Lev. 21:20 states that I may not approach the altar of God if I have a defect in my sight. I have to admit that I wear reading glasses. Does my vision have to be 20/20, or is there some wiggle room here?

and my own favourite

- I know from Lev. 11:6-8 that touching the skin of a dead pig makes me unclean, but may I still play football if I wear gloves?

Today's Gospel reading began, "When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him." (Mt.22.34)

How had Jesus silenced the Sadducees? They had asked him a question, wanting to catch him out. They said, 'There were seven brothers ... the first married and died childless [and Moses taught that if a woman's husband dies leaving her childless she should marry his brother]. The second brother died similarly, and the third, down to the seventh. Then the woman herself died. In the resurrection whose wife will she be?'

Jesus answered them, "You are wrong because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God". He doesn't then say the scriptures don't matter. He quotes them and interprets them – in the resurrection they do not marry...citing the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob Jesus said...'God is not the God of the dead but of the living'. "You are wrong because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God". Not only had they mis-read the text and its meaning, they didn't know the power of God and had missed the whole point.

So they regrouped and asked another question to test him, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Jesus then joined a long Rabbinic tradition and summarized the law, not just the 10 commandments but all six hundred and twenty

something laws in the levitical code. His response isn't unique but it is very distinctive: love God and love your neighbour as yourself.

Now that does catch both the meaning of the text and the spirit and power of God. He put another question back to them, one that was unanswerable, "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" David's they answered, so he quoted a Psalm and asked, "If David calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" and no one was able to give him an answer.

It's easy to trade Bible texts and for each side of a dispute to batter the other side down. It's much more important to find the word of God within the text and God's gracious and powerful spirit among us.

Today Melissa Smith is being baptized. She has the love and support of her family and friends around her. They will provide a safe place in which she will grow. She also has a place in the Christian Church where she will be nurtured by prayer, reading of the scriptures and love of the Church community in which she will grow. For her, and for all of us, the task is not to trade texts in a know it all me right you wrong kind of way, but to allow the scriptures to open us up to the loving power of God among us in Jesus Christ. That's what the Bible calls us to do and when we do anything less we fall short of the glory of God.