

# Sunday 26 October 2009

## A Word in Season – Sunday Worship for Bible Sunday

Studio announcement:

The Professor of Biblical Interpretation and Dean of King's College London, the Reverend Professor Richard Burridge, is the preacher for Sunday Worship now - which comes live from St Martin in the Fields, Trafalgar Square, in the heart of London. The service is led by the Vicar, the Reverend Nicholas Holtam. It begins as the choir sings Vaughan Williams' setting of George Herbert's poem, 'Come my way, my truth, my life.'

**Introit**            Come my way my truth my life            *Vaughan Williams*

**NH**    Good morning. Welcome to St Martin-in-the-Fields on the day known in churches as 'Bible Sunday'. The Bible is the most popular book in the world. When you go to hospital or a hotel, or for that matter a prison, you quite often find a Gideon Bible. It suggests verses to read when lonely or sad, or when you want to give thanks and are full of joy. Sometimes this can even be the same passage. Psalm 23, "The Lord's my shepherd" gets sung at weddings and funerals assuring us of God's presence in times of joy as well as sorrow. Throughout our lives and in every circumstance, the Bible has an astonishing ability to give us 'a word in season'.

And it isn't always comforting. Sometimes we hear words of judgement that pull us up short and turn us round, "For", as it says in the Letter to the Hebrews, "the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. (Hebrews 4.11).

The Scriptures are said to be 'the lively oracles of God' and they have entered deeply into our culture. That introit 'Come my way, my Truth, my Life', is a poem by George Herbert paraphrasing and meditating on Jesus's saying in John's Gospel, "I am the way the truth and the life".

For Christians, Jesus is the way of life and in him we see God fully. But there's no surprise we have different views about who he is, what he means and how we should follow him, for in the Scriptures we find him attested to by four Gospels, twelve disciples and a collection of books that make up the Bible. This is the treasure we come to celebrate today as we give thanks for the gift God has given us in the Holy Scriptures.

Much of Christian worship is based on Biblical texts and our first hymn, Praise to the Lord the Almighty the King of creation, is a favourite based on verses from the Psalms. First a free and expressive version of Psalm 103, "Bless the Lord, O my soul: And all that is within me, bless his holy name" and then a glorious ending with the last verse of the last Psalm, Psalm 150, "let everything that has breath, praise the Lord".

## Hymn

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!  
O my soul, praise him, for he is thy health and salvation!  
All ye who hear,  
Brothers and sisters draw near;  
praise him in glad adoration.

Praise to the Lord, who over all things so wondrously reigneth,  
shelters thee under his wings, yea, so gently sustaineth!  
Hast thou not seen  
how thy desires ever have been  
Granted in what he ordaineth?

Praise to the Lord, who doth prosper thy work and defend thee;  
Surely his goodness and mercy here daily attend thee.  
Ponder anew  
All the Almighty can do,  
He who with love doth befriend thee.

Praise to the Lord, O let all that is in me adore him!  
All that hath life and breath, come now with praises before him.  
Let the Amen  
Sound from his people again:  
Gladly for ay we adore him.

*Words: Joachim Neander 1650-1680*

*Tr Catherine Wordsworth 1827-78 and others*

*Tune: Lobe Den Herren*

**NH** One of the ways in which the Bible gets into not just our individual souls but our corporate soul, our culture, is that much of the Church's prayer simply recites scripture. It's a pattern formed in the early Church which entered the monasteries where the Psalms are said and Scripture read in a way that responds to the rhythm of life and shapes the day, week, month and year. It's the same pattern in the Church of England's Morning and Evening Prayer, as it is in the freer forms of Christian worship where phrases from Scripture give voice to our feelings, our hopes and concerns.

The Bible is prayed and it also has to be read intelligently, using our God-given wisdom to hear God speak through the text in every generation. The Bible has been used to support slavery, racism, Apartheid, and discrimination against women, and that ought to give Christians pause for thought in the extraordinarily contentious disputes of today about gender and same sex relationships. We hear the Word of God when we read it with wisdom and spiritual insight.

Let us pray not just in thanksgiving for the gift of the Scriptures but for our use of them.

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy scripture to be written for our learning:  
help us so to hear them, to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them  
that through patience and the comfort of your holy word,  
we may embrace and for ever hold fast  
the hope of everlasting life  
which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. **Amen**

Good use of scripture makes us bigger people, with hearts to love. W H Vanstone's marvellous poem 'Love's endeavour, love's expense', arose out his experience of parish ministry. Its approach to the passionate, suffering, love of God is through wisdom and hard won experience. 'Morning glory, starlit sky, soaring music scholars' truth' set to a tune by Michael Fleming arranged by our Director of Music Andrew Earis.

**Choir** Morning glory starlit sky *Michael Fleming, arr. Andrew Earis*

Morning glory, starlit sky,  
Soaring music, scholars' truth,  
Flight of swallows, autumn leaves,  
Memory's treasure, grace of youth:

Open are the gifts of God,  
Gifts of love to mind and sense;  
Hidden is love's agony,  
Love's endeavour, love's expense.

Love that gives, gives ever more,  
Gives with zeal, with eager hands,  
Spares not, keeps not, all outpours,  
Ventures all, its all expends.

Drained is love in making full,  
Bound in setting others free,  
Poor in making many rich,  
Weak in giving power to be.

Therefore he who shows us God  
Helpless hangs upon the tree;  
And the nails and crown of thorns  
Tell of what God's love must be.

Here is God: no monarch he,  
Throned in easy state to reign;  
Here is God whose arms of love  
Aching, spent, the world sustain.

**NH** In front of me is the most beautiful book. It's about 3' x 2', and 3" thick. It's heavy, weighing about 30 lbs., and it's just one volume, the Prophets, of what will be a seven volume Bible given to St Martin's by the Roman Catholic Benedictine community at St John's at Collegetown in Minnesota in the United States.

The St John's Bible is the first handwritten illuminated manuscript of the whole Bible since the invention of the printing press and Reformation. In some ways it was a crazy idea, but it was commissioned in 1998, "to ignite the spiritual imagination with the Word of God for the new millennium"; and it does that brilliantly placing before us a text which was handed down for far longer than it has been printed, and through the crafted beauty raising questions about the nature and authority of what we so often take for granted as a 'given' because it seems so fixed in print.

The team of six calligraphers and 10 illustrators is being led by Donald Jackson in Monmouthshire. Donald is the Queen's calligrapher so it's a very fitting gift to St Martin's, which is 'The Royal Parish Church'. They have spent twelve years writing this Bible, the same length of time that we've been renewing the buildings of St Martin's.

The monks of Minnesota were so fleet of foot that when they saw how beautiful the handwritten pages were, they decided to have them printed as well. What we have been given is a beautiful facsimile of the original. It's a limited edition and so far this is the only one in the United Kingdom.

The pages with illustrations really catch the eye. I love the call of Isaiah, "In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord..." The page is full of purple with seraphs wings, a vision of heaven and of our being called and caught up into it. But the pages of text are also beautiful with a lively calligraphy that invites us to linger longer than the print we race over and savour every word in the way that monks read the scriptures, slowly and attentively, listening for God in them, as St Benedict said, "with the ear of your heart".

### **Reader Ruth Hutchison**

Isaiah chapter 55 from verse 6

Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

### **Hymn**

Let all the world in every corner sing, my God and King!  
The heavens are not too high, His praise may thither fly,  
The earth is not too low, His praises there may grow.  
Let all the world in every corner sing, my God and King!  
Let all the world in every corner sing, my God and King!  
The church with psalms must shout, no door can keep them out;  
But, above all, the heart must bear the longest part.  
Let all the world in every corner sing, my God and King!  
*George Herbert 1593-1633, Tune: Luckington, Basil Harwood 1859-1949*

**NH** Interpreting the Scriptures is an art and our preacher this morning is Richard Burridge, a neighbour and friend of St Martin's. Richard is Dean and Professor of Biblical Interpretation at King's College where the motto is Sancte et Sapiente, Holiness and Wisdom.

### **Richard Burridge First Address - 400 years of the Bible's impact**

Have you ever noticed that the Bible begins in a garden ('east of Eden') – and ends in a city, the heavenly city of Jerusalem. It's a bit like that here: St Martin-in-the-*Fields* is actually right in the middle of London, on Trafalgar Square, facing Nelson's Column all the tourists. However, centuries ago it was surrounded by fields, so like the Bible, it has moved from the garden to the city. A short walk south-west across those fields was Westminster Abbey, where originally Benedictine monks (like those of St John's Minnesota) copied and passed down manuscripts of the biblical books. Four hundred years ago in the Jerusalem Chamber at the Abbey, scholars were translating these manuscripts into English to produce the King James Version of the Bible, eventually published in 1611. Its impact on British culture and society was enormous.

When I was an undergraduate, our Chaplain was preaching on Isaiah 55 (which we heard read just now) – and he suddenly woke us all up by threatening to throw a cricket ball into the pews to have an impact, and to accomplish what he wanted, just as Isaiah says God's word does (Is 55.11). The King James Bible was like that cricket ball, hurled into British society and having an enormous impact through the last four hundred years. Our very language is full of biblical phrases taken from it, like 'the powers that be' or a 'good Samaritan'. Even more importantly, the biblical beliefs and Christian ideas drove the development of our society – and were exported out across the world through the missionary activities in the colonies along with copies of the King James Bible. However we might feel about some other aspects of that imperial legacy, the significance of 'the Word of the Lord' going out everywhere in English has been stupendous.

But it does not stop there. Such biblical manuscripts are now preserved in the British Museum and British Library, a short walk to the north of this church, along with many other copies, much more ancient than those available in 1611. Meanwhile, a stroll from here up the Strand to the east will bring you to King's College London, with our world-renowned Department of Theology and Religious Studies, where I and my colleagues working in biblical studies are trying to translate and interpret these ancient books – and what they still have to say to us today. You see, what unites us all, St Martin's, Westminster Abbey, those working on manuscripts at the British Library and King's College London, is that the Bible remains absolutely central for all we are doing.

And together we are looking ahead to 2011, when Christians and others will celebrate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the King James Bible with a vast range of activities bringing together language and culture, scholarship and preaching. It is all being coordinated through the 2011 Trust with the Prince of Wales as Patron, including a major international conference about the Bible at King's College London. On Bible Sunday today, Isaiah's reading from this beautiful version of the Bible reminds us of the impact of the word of God going out into the world to 'accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it' (Isaiah 55.11). We are called to respond to that word today – and to prepare for that wonderful festival in just over a year's time. It will be just like when the Israelites would gather in the Temple to sing psalms like Psalm 47, telling us to 'clap your hands' and 'shout to God with songs of joy'.

**Choir** O clap your hands      John Rutter

**NH** John Rutter's 'O Clap your hands' another Psalm singing the praise of God. In the St John's Bible, beautiful calligraphy and illustration combine to lift the words off the page, the lively word of God. One of my favourite pages is the beginning of John's Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word....", which gets read with grace and grandeur each Christmas at Midnight Mass. For the St John's community, and in their

Bible, it has special significance but what they've done so cleverly in the illustration is to use a passage from Paul's letter to the Colossians to 'flesh out' and interpret the emerging figure of Christ in gold on the page. Whereas the Gospel text of this handwritten Bible is clear and easy to read in black and white, in this illumination the passage from Colossians is in gold, as are other passages about people on the edge who bring good news. For those of us not used to reading manuscripts, it takes a while for the eyes to focus. Once you've got your eye in, it's quite easy to follow the familiar verses, from Colossians chapter 1 verse 15.

**Reader Katherine Hedderley**

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers--all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

**Richard Burridge Second Address – Unity and Diversity in the Bible today**

In 1611, society was much more monochrome, so the King James Bible gradually became known as the 'authorized version'. However, King James' instructions to scholars to translate the Bible four hundred years ago inspired subsequent generations to interpret it again and again into contemporary English – leading to the Revised Version of 1885, the Revised Standard Version in 1952 and the New RSV in 1989, as well as many other translations also 'authorized' for reading in church today. Some people are understandably a little confused by the diversity now available to us. But the very word 'Bible' comes from *ta biblia*, the Greek plural for 'the books', or 'the scriptures'. We do not just have a vast range of manuscripts in the British Library, or that we study in King's College London. The same plurality is actually there in the Bible itself, or as perhaps we should say, the Scriptures themselves. For the Bible is more like a library, containing sixty-six books, written in a rich and varied mix of genres, languages, cultures, authors, audiences over a thousand years.

This is reflected in the St John's Bible, with its riot of colour, images, words and pictures, texts and illuminations. It is like the rich variety of the world outside St Martin's now, with the 'fields' replaced by the cosmopolitan crowds thronging into Trafalgar Square. After we exported the King James Bible across the world, now all these nations and languages, cultures and ideas have come to enrich our life together, both physically in these islands and also virtually through the internet. But how can we find some unity in all this diversity? Can we still hear the impact of 'word of God' in all this plurality of human words?

Traditionally, the sixty-six books of the Bible are known as the 'canon', another Greek word meaning 'a measuring rod' or 'standard'. The rich diversity of the different scriptures contained within the Bible is not all one voice, delivered in Jacobean English of four hundred years ago! If the divine voice is to impact upon us today, we need to listen for the Word of God in it all. The great translator J B Phillips said that working on the Bible was like re-wiring an old house, and occasionally getting a shock because something that looked dead was actually live!

The calligraphers of the St John's Bible have given us a clue by using that reading from Colossians to 'flesh out' the illumination of 'in the beginning was the Word' from John 1. This is indeed 'shocking'. Paul says that Jesus is 'the image of the invisible God' (Colossians

1.15), while John tells us that ‘the Word of God’ has become flesh among us (John 1.14). The *written* word is thus illuminated by the *living* word. The canon, the ‘measuring standard’ for the plurality, the unity in the diversity, is found in the life and ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. We are not talking about dead texts here, but a ‘lively word’, the word which went forth from the mouth of God (Isaiah 55.11) to be ‘fleshed out’ in Jesus. All the different scriptures bear witness to him, for in him all ‘the fullness of God’ is pleased to dwell, and through him ‘God is reconciling to himself’ all this rich diversity of our universe, ‘whether on earth or in heaven’ (Col. 1.19-20). On Bible Sunday today, and in the anniversary year of the Bible in 2011, we are called to respond in praise to the living Word of God, communicated to us, incarnated in Jesus, wherever that may lead us in the richly coloured tapestry of God’s love.

## **Choir Psalm 150**

*Talbot*

**NH** Ruth Hutchinson came to England from Jamaica 50 years ago this week. She became a member of St Martin’s because she had heard us on BBC World Service. In this Black History Month she is going to lead the prayers with my colleague, the Revd Katherine Hedderley.

**Ruth** Let us give thanks for the gift of the Bible, for the translators, scribes, scholars, printers and publishers. May our spiritual imagination be rekindled, and listening ‘with the ear of our heart’, may we hear the Word of God among us.

**Sung response:** Bless the Lord my soul  
and praise God’s holy name  
Bless the Lord my soul  
Who leads me into life

**Katherine** We pray for the Church, that we may minister the love of God in Jesus Christ to all in need. We give thanks for the rich unity and diversity of the Church, and pray for those who struggle to find their place within it.

**Sung response:** Bless the Lord my soul  
and praise God’s holy name  
Bless the Lord my soul  
Who leads me into life

**Ruth** We pray for the peace of the world, each of us remembering in our mind’s eye one place of violence, asking that the peacemakers will be blessed. For justice and our stewardship of God’s creation. We pray for those who are sick, holding before you the people in our hearts and minds.

**Sung response:** Bless the Lord my soul...

**Katherine** Our Father,  
**All** **who art in heaven,**  
**hallowed be thy name;**  
**thy kingdom come;**  
**thy will be done;**  
**on earth as it is in heaven.**  
**Give us this day our daily bread.**  
**And forgive us our trespasses,**  
**as we forgive those who trespass against us.**  
**And lead us not into temptation;**  
**but deliver us from evil.**  
**For thine is the kingdom,**  
**the power and the glory,**  
**For ever and ever. Amen.**

**NH** The Bible testifies to the power of God to give new life, celebrated in Charles Wesley's great hymn, "O for a thousand tongues to sing".

**Hymn** O for a thousand tongues to sing  
my dear Redeemer's praise,  
the glories of my God and King,  
the triumphs of his grace!

Jesus! the Name that charms our fears  
and bids our sorrows cease;  
'tis music in the sinner's ears,  
'tis life and health and peace.

He speaks, and listening to his voice,  
new life the dead receive;  
the mournful broken hearts rejoice,  
the humble poor believe.

Hear him, ye deaf; his praise, ye dumb,  
your loosened tongues employ;  
ye blind, behold, your Saviour come;  
and leap, ye lame, for joy!

My gracious Master and my God,  
assist me to proclaim  
and spread through all the earth abroad  
the honours of thy Name.

*Words: Charles Wesley, 1707-88*

*Tune: Lyngham*

**NH** The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you, the Lord look kindly on you and give you peace. My brothers, my sisters, may the Lord bless you. **Amen.**

Organ voluntary      'Festivo'      *Martin How*