

29th October 2017 (*John 5:35-47, 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5*)

Father,
may these spoken words
be faithful to the written word
and lead us to the living Word,
Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

It was the 21st September 1832. Sir Walter Scott, the great Scottish novelist and poet, lay dying. He turned to his son-in-law and friend, John Lockhart, and asked him, "Will you read to me from the Book?". John was puzzled as to which of his many books his father-in-law was referring to, so he asked him which one. "Which book?" replied Walter Scott, "There is but one book; bring the Bible."

Today, if you hadn't already picked up on it, is Bible Sunday: the day when many churches particularly celebrate the gift of Scripture to us. And as we follow on in our Martin Luther series, we've come to the week of *Sola scriptura* or 'Scripture alone'. This is the doctrine that the Bible is the sole, infallible source of authority on Christian matters, and is only *mediated* through other sources of authority such as Tradition, Reason and Experience. I've actually been studying the relationship between the sources in one of my Theology modules recently... but I won't be reading you my

essay this morning, don't worry! It is interesting, however, to hear different takes on the authority of Scripture.

Martin Luther took authority of Scripture very seriously. He held a high view of the inspiration of the Bible– at one time referring to it as "the Holy Spirit book". He took the narratives in it as living events that might have happened to him or any of his contemporaries, rather than distant, barely-relevant stories. Perhaps we could take a leaf out of Luther's book when reading our Bibles...

One of Luther's greatest contributions to the Reformation was his translation of the Bible into his native language of German so that ordinary people could, as he put it, "feel the words of Scripture in the heart".

As this is Bible Sunday, it might be considered scandalous not to focus on our Bible readings for this morning. So let's have a look at them again...

We have here perspectives on Scripture for two different audiences. In John's Gospel, Jesus is speaking to some Jews who have read the scriptures inside-out and back-to-front. But they've missed the whole point. The one to whom the scriptures point is standing right in front of them... and they just don't realize! Jesus says to them: "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life." I think sometimes it is all too easy to get caught up in the individual words and forget to listen

to the message! The Bible is so important as it testifies to who Jesus is. But, without God's Spirit breathing life into those words, they might as well be in invisible ink. Despite Jesus' works, his Father's testimony, and all the written testimony of the prophets, including Moses, the Jews to whom Jesus was speaking, simply did not get it. They did not have God's word abiding in them because they did not believe him whom God had sent. They did not believe in Jesus.

The Bible is the written word of God but Jesus is the living Word. And we have this Word abiding in us if we believe in Jesus.

In the letter to Timothy, the focus is on someone who does have this living Word in them – they do believe in Jesus. The message for Timothy, and for the wider Church, is “continue” – don't stop now! You're doing well – keep going! Like the Jews who Jesus spoke to, Timothy knows his stuff: “from childhood [he has] known the sacred writings that are able to instruct for salvation”. But there's one crucial difference: all this knowing and learning is “through faith in Christ Jesus”. This isn't just some academic exercise – Timothy has a living faith, and therefore, the living Word abiding in him.

The author of the letter goes on to affirm the value of all Scripture: “All scripture is inspired by God”. It is ‘God-breathed’ and God's Spirit is at work in and through it.

Now that Timothy has this living Word by believing in the written word in the power of the Holy Spirit, what's he to do with it? The short answer is “go and tell”. If you have good news, you don't generally keep it to yourself. And this is the best Good News – it's the difference between being judged as living or dead! The Kingdom is coming: proclaim the message, whether you feeling like it or not.

Sadly, often this will fall on deaf or itching ears. People will, and already have, “turned away from listening to the truth and wandered away to myths”. You just have to turn the news on or check your Facebook newsfeed to see that. In his book ‘Simple Prayer’, John Dalrymple writes: “The most real in this world is the most invisible; but because the most invisible, the most easily forgotten. Reading about these invisible realities of our Faith corrects the tendency for our hold on the invisible to lessen. It feeds our minds with the Truth.”

Reading, and indwelling, the Bible helps us to hold on to this invisible Truth. I've been trying to listen regularly to Nicky and Pippa Gumbel's daily Bible in One Year app as I find it helps me to integrate the Old and New Testament passages and to see the bigger message behind them. And it's amazing just how often God speaks to me through the words of the Scripture passages and the Gumbels' commentaries (including the idea for the opening of this sermon!)

The Timothy reading ends with the encouragement to be resolute in our faith and proclamation: “As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.”

Martin Luther, and other translators such as William Tyndale, faced huge opposition to their translations of the Bible. But where would we be without them today? I, for one, certainly don't fancy the prospect of doing my Bible study in Latin...

And the Good News for us this morning? I think it's that we have all that we need for the task to which we're called. We can have confidence because of Jesus. We can have confidence in our proclamations of his message. Because the written word proclaims the living Word, and once we've received the truth of this into our lives, then God will use our own words too - mine and yours!