

2 Timothy 3.10-17

¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

BLESSED Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

At this very moment, there is a battle going on in the Anglican Communion. As Christians we should not be unaware or unconcerned about this.

The battle is this:

The Episcopal churches of America, Scotland and now Brazil have all agreed to conduct same sex marriages.

In doing so they have gone against the 1998 resolution of the Lambeth Conference, which states:

In view of the teaching of Scripture, [the Conference] upholds faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union, and believes that abstinence is right for those who are not called to marriage.

There are those in the Church of England who are pressing for the Church of England to conduct same sex marriages.

And those who are seeking to maintain the resolution of the Lambeth conference that marriage can only ever be between a man and a woman, and that outside of this kind of marriage all Christians are called to celibacy.

Why does this matter?

Well, of course it matters to those who experience same sex attraction.

All Christians will surely agree that it is the job of the Church to understand the mind of God, to teach what he has revealed to be true, and to support its members to live faithfully to that.

Christians who experience same sex attraction surely have a right to know how their church understands the will of God for human relationships and how to live accordingly.

It also matters for another reason.

What authority do we as Christians give to the Scriptures when we try to understand the mind of God?

Radical theologians might argue that the Bible is just one 'source' among many. A product of its own time and place the bible is a useful insight into how God's people understood God in the past, but in our own time and place we might (indeed must) come to very different conclusions.

Where the bible is at odds with human reason or current scientific 'knowledge' the bible needs to be reinterpreted or even revised.

Radical feminist theologians have argued, for example, that Paul was hopeless misogynistic and anything he has to say about women simply needs to be ditched. We know better than him!

The trouble with this kind of approach - and I would suggest actually that there are many problems with this approach, not least that its based on a false premise Paul was radically pro-women and not a misogynist at all! -

The trouble with this kind of approach is that it ignores the very clear teaching of the bible itself that it is not just a human construct but is "God breathed". (2 Timothy 3.16).

Jesus often quoted Scripture, with the words, "God said". For him the words of *Scripture* were one and the same as the words of *God*.

And this has been the understanding of the Church of God down through the ages.

Therefore, I would want to suggest, as Christians, on whatever issue it might be, when seeking to understand the mind of God, and then to teach and act upon God's mind, we need to give the highest authority to the Scriptures.

Of course, we will want to bring our human intellect to bear in understanding what the Scriptures really mean – they were written by human beings, in particular times and places. We need to understand them in their context in order to apply them in our own.

Of course we will want to bring our common sense, our scientific knowledge, our experience of what God is doing by his Spirit now.

Of course we will want to bring the understanding of those who have gone before us – how the church has traditionally understood the Scriptures. How arrogant it would be to assume that our forebears were ignorant and unthinking and that we always know better.

But in the end, as Christians, we need to say, God is just a bit cleverer than us! Where he has spoken we will listen and obey.

Now, all this is a rather long introduction to our bible passage to learn and live by today: 2 Timothy 3.10-17 and specifically verse 15b-17:

...the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy is the second of Paul's letters to a younger Christian leader – Timothy. Paul is writing from prison in Rome and he's coming to the end of his life. He's fought the good fight, run the race and kept the faith (2 Timothy 4.7), and is now looking forward to receiving a crown of righteousness (4.8).

In this letter he passes on the baton of leadership to Timothy. He encourages Timothy to be strong in the grace God provides (2.1). Timothy was not given a spirit of timidity, but a spirit

of power and of love and of self-control (1.7).

Timothy is to teach the faith (4.2) reminding people of the truths about God (2.14).

And it is for this that he will need the Scriptures, which he has been steeped in from birth (3.15) through the teaching of his mother, Eunice and grandmother, Lois (1.5).

Why are these Scriptures so important?

Because they are inspired by God – when we hear them we hear the words and understand the mind of God himself.

Because they show us how to find salvation – forgiveness of sins, freedom from the punishment they mean we deserve, a right relationship with God, eternal life...

And because they tell us how to live out our faith in practice – being equipped for every good work.

The Scriptures, says St Paul, are God's way of telling us to enter a relationship with him and how to live that relationship out day by day.

Wow!

How good God is to have made all this clear for us!

How precious these words of Scripture must be to us – the very words of life themselves!

What a responsibility is laid upon us to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life.

I wanted to share two sadnesses with you this morning.

They are these:

Firstly that as a church in the UK so few Christians engage on any meaningful level with the Scriptures.

The Scriptures are a lamp to our feet and a light to our path; sweeter than honey from comb, the sword by which we might fight off the attacks of the devil.

Surely we would want to read the Scriptures, to read about the Scripture, to listen to sermons about the Scriptures:

“Lord – I want to know you more, to love you more; give me more of you!”

The second sadness is that so many Christians in the UK don't wrestle with the Scriptures to seek to discover God's mind on important issues.

We simply get on with our lives as we want, and then add a religious gloss to them by coming to church on a Sunday (when we don't have something better to do!).

This means that when as a Church we need to be clear about what God's mind for certain issues (for example should the church conduct gay marriages) we are all at sea.

And it means that when there is debate in the public square: about LGBT rights, abortion, prison reform, selective education, prison reform, defence spending, healthcare provision (all items in the news over the last few weeks) we have nothing to say!

Shame on us!

I think, to be fair, there are many things which discourage Christians from reading the bible.

It may be that they've tried to read it in old English and started with the more difficult laws in the Old Testament, and not understanding it have given up. They haven't truly grasped what the bible says.

It may be that they have been inoculated against the bible by well-meaning but incompetent teachers. Every bible passage is about being nice to each other. And so they haven't been gripped up the epic story of God's relationship with his creation and the sheer wonder of God's self-revelation through his word. They haven't been moved to absolute joy in an encounter with God.

It may be that they have swallowed the post-modern lie that the bible is just like any other book – it is what you 'understand it to be'. Rather than a revelation of absolute objective truth its just a though provoking story. And so it has been buried under a good John Grisham novel or piece of poetry. They have missed that in the bible we discover the real truth about God, ourselves and life.

It may be, sadly, that the bible is just too much for some people. Happy in their sin, they do not want their lives exposed to the blinding light of God's truth, necessitating a change; even if it is for the best. Or maybe for others it is just business and laziness which has kept them from the bible. And so they have failed to find the bread of life which nourishes, sustains and satisfies. They have forgone the very thing which their heart truly desires if only they would pursue it.

Do any of these apply to you?

There is but one remedy. Take up the bible and read. And then read about it. And listen to it preached. And pray it over with God himself. And talk about it with others. Hunger and thirst after it as the living and active word of God.

It is only then that we will ourselves will be secure in our relationship with God, equipped to walk in the good works that God has prepared for us to walk in. And its only then that we will be able, having sought to understand the mind of God, to share that with others and help them to live it too.

I was very careful at the start of this sermon, whilst highlighting the issue of same sex marriage, not to tell you what I thought the Church of England should do. If you want to know, ask me.

But in a sense what to think on this one issue is not the point of this sermon. What is, is to urge you to make yourself a "bible person". When you form an opinion on this or any other issue, is to do it having grappled with what the bible has to say about it. And its to urge you, not only to read and understand the Scriptures, but to put them into practice yourself.

For "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work".