

Sermon on the Bible : October 2022

Text: 'All Scripture is inspired by God' (2 Tim, 3V16)

Over the next week or so we are invited by our Sunday readings to think afresh about the significance of the Bible. What place does it have in our life as a Church and what role does it play in our lives as individual Christians? Do we need the Bible and if we do what value and significance should we attach to it?

I'd like to base my thoughts about the Bible on a comment made by the great Victorian preacher, Charles Spurgeon. **'Defend the Bible?'** he exclaimed. **'I'd sooner defend a lion!'** It's that comparison to a lion that I want to explore and see how it helps us draw out the significance of the Bible. So let's ask ourselves: **why doesn't a lion need defending?**

The 1st reason is that a lion has bite. A lion has huge teeth and powerful jaws and it can tear any animal to pieces and do so with devastating effect. And this is a good reminder to us that the Bible can have the same effect.

The story is told of a sweet old lady reading her Bible on a train. A young businessman sat opposite her was fascinated and leant over. *'Do you really believe those stories?'* he asked. *'I most certainly do, young man'* came the firm reply. *'Yeh but what about the old geezer who got swallowed by a whale – how could he have survived inside a fish for 3 days?'* *'You're talking about the prophet Jonah and I have no idea how all that happened but I look forward to asking him when we meet in heaven.'* *'Hmm. But what if Jonah's not in heaven? What if he went to hell?'* persisted the young man. *'Well then'* replied the old lady smiling sweetly *'you'll be able to ask him yourself won't you?'*

So often we think of the Bible like that sweet old lady. It is somewhat behind the times, harmless and at times rather quaint. We like the butts of it which give comforting promises or strong assurances of God's love and patience towards us. We enjoy its recognition of the many 'up's' and 'downs' of life that affect us all and how God draws close to us and supports us through them. But to see the Bible as a kind of cushion that softly indulges us is to see only part of it. Like the sweet old lady on the train **the Bible also has bite.** It can confront us with a fearful message – one which demands same form of accountability for the way we have lived. It does not shy away from talking about God's judgement and wrath and indeed punishment of the wicked and the wayward. It is not sugary and sentimental about evil and the Bible can point the finger of blame very straight when it comes to sin and evil. It is not always a comforting companion. The Bible has bite. And that is one of the reasons we should read it – and indeed heed it, because the Bible speaks the truth about our human condition it knows that we have a tendency towards self-indulgence and self-deceit and that we can often be too soft on ourselves. We need to be reminded of our foibles and failings. We need a reality check.

Kafta was right when he said:

'I think we ought to read only the kind
of the books that wound and stab us ... we need
books that affect us like a disaster, that
grieve us deeply ... A book must be an axe for the
frozen sea inside us.'

Yes we all have a frozen sea inside us – the sea of indifference and inertia and we need the Bible to break us up open, to stir us to action, to motivate us to transcend our selfish ways and engage lovingly with the needy world around us.

So painful as it can often be when we are on the receiving end of it, we should be thankful that the Bible has bite.

A second reason that we don't need to defend a lion is because it has brawn.

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A lion has powerful legs and a muscular bulky frame which means that it can use its strength and its weight to hold down its victims. The Bible also has that kind of brawn. It has the strength to pin us down and make us realize that we are its intended target. The Bible contains many narratives that highlight the dilemmas of our human existence and confront us directly with the challenge of how we respond to them now that it is our turn to live life here on earth. It describes both success and failure and it holds out an invitation to you and me to decide which path we would choose. It is also peppered with those deeply searching questions which demand a very direct answer: 'Your life what is it?' 'When a human being dies can he or she live again?'

it also has those stark reminders that give us nowhere to go: '**We brought nothing into this world and we take nothing out of it.**' So where does that leave our preoccupation with material things? '**You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your strength.**' '**You shall have no other gods before me**'. God's demand for total self-giving and total loyalty leaves most of us aware of the inadequacy of our love for Him. In this and so many other ways, the Bible holds us to account and does not allow us to escape the power of its presence and its claim on us. **The Bible has brawn.**

A third reason that we do not need to defend a lion is because it has bounce. A lion may be bulky but it is also athletic and able to spring out of its hiding place with great speed and agility.

The Bible also has these qualities. We may think it is an ancient text, heavy with old ideas, and that it will have little relevance to our contemporary world. And yet the Bible can surprise us again and again. It speaks words that penetrate to the very heart of our human existence with all its varied temptations, tribulations and occasional triumphs.

The Bible can catch us unawares by its ability to portray a particular way of seeing a situation or by some phrase or sentence it uses in expressing our human aspirations and desires. The remarkable thing is that we can read the Bible frequently and come up against the same passages again and again – and yet, suddenly a whole new meaning can hit us from words and themes that we thought were familiar. **Take a simple example – the Parable of the Good Samaritan.** Who is the real hero of that story? Well, obviously we might say, it is the Good Samaritan. He stopped to help a stranger and indeed a person who was seen as a hated foreigner. He put himself at risk of being ambushed by stopping and he made sure the injured man got to a place of safety. So yes – the Good Samaritan is the hero. But think again. What the Good Samaritan did was indeed heroic and commendable, but it was ambulance work. It inconvenienced him for at the most 24 hours. After that he passed the problem on to the Innkeeper. '**Look after him**' says the Good Samaritan, '**and whatever else you spend I will repay you**'. The man's recuperation was left in the hands of the Innkeeper. And having been so seriously injured that might have meant months of care. That might have been palatable if there was a financial reward resulting from it, but there wasn't. '**Whatever you spend, I will repay**'. The exact cost would be met with no bonus or extras. So for months a room would be filled in the inn; the innkeeper would have the extra work of caring for a sick man – and he would not receive any recognition for it. he was the one who bore the brunt of rescuing the man attacked on the Jericho road, not the Good Samaritan. So maybe he was the hero – an exemplar of those who preserve and endure in the work of healing and compassion that Christ calls us to.

And what is true of that story can be true of so many other narratives in the Bible – they can bounce around and catch us unawares in so many different ways. So to be dismissive of the Bible can be a foolish stance.

Voltaire, the 18th Century atheist, said that the Bible would be defunct and discarded within 50 years. In fact, by a strange twist of circumstance, 50 years later Voltaire's own house had become a publishing and distribution centre for the Bible. **So like a lion the Bible has bounce.**

Finally, a lion has beauty. It is a majestic creature which strides the jungle like a king. It has prowess and authority that commands respect from all the other animals which share the jungle with it. in the same way the Bible has that kind of beauty so that it stands above all other books and publications. Great writers are often awarded the Booker prize – but can you recall who won the Booker prize 5 or 10 or 20 years ago? Harry Potter books are all the rage at present and J.K Rowling is a famous author. But there will be something dated and distant **(continued on next page)**

about her 100 years from now. But not so the Bible. Even though it can be dated back 2-3000 years its contents have an enduring appeal and relevance. Why is that?

The answer lies with the contents of the Bible. The Bible provides evidence that there is a God. It records many historical events that point to divine activity and involvement in our human lives. Someone has said the Bible is like the evidence in a trial when a jury is trying to decide if someone is guilty or innocent. There are available all kinds of materials – letters, phone records, witness accounts, character references etc etc. some of these are more important than others – but they eventually point towards a verdict. And in the same way all the different literature collected between the covers of the Bible help us with the question: *'Is there a God – and does God act in our world?'* it is a vitally important question because it affects our whole sense of purpose and meaning and value in life.

But the Bible's contents do more than provide pieces of detached evidence about God. In the pages of that great book we also hear God speaking to us – God reaching out to us, telling us who He is and what He wants. God inviting us into a relationship with Him. Millions of people have come to realize that God loves them and delights in them and wants the best for them by paying heed to the words of the Bible. One of the greatest theologians of the 20th Century, Karl Barth was once asked – ***'What is the message you have tried to teach throughout your life?'*** ***'Simple'*** replied Barth. ***'The message has been this:***

'Jesus loves us,

This I know

For the Bible tells me so.'

Quoting that children's hymn, Barth pointed to the core purpose of the Bible: to tell us that God loves us – and wants us to know that truth and to live by it. What could be more important or relevant or life-changing than that?

'Defend the Bible?' said Charles Spurgeon.

'I'd sooner defend a lion'

Amen.

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