

**Sunday 23rd October 2016 (Bible Sunday)**

**St Faith, Havant**

**8.00am – Mass & 9.30am – Parish Mass**

*Isaiah 45:22-25; Romans 15:1-6; St Luke 4:16-24*

The Qur'an, the holy book of Islam, has a very interesting phrase to describe the close relationship between Islam and the other Abrahamic religions Judaism and Christianity. According to the Qur'an we are collectively 'the people of the Book'. Although certain terrorist groups and individuals today appear to have a different opinion, most Muslim interpreters hold that our relationship to Islam as fellow 'people of the Book' is a special and close one; though we are not considered to be true believers because we have refused the message of the prophet Mohammed, we are nevertheless acknowledged as believers in God (Allah in Arabic).

On this Bible Sunday it may seem strange that I have started by talking about the Qur'an and Islam, but I think it is really interesting to consider how other people might perceive us – and indeed, how we might perceive ourselves. There are over 1.5 billion Muslims in the world, and they see us as 'people of the Book'. I wonder how many of you agree with that as a description of us Christians – are we people of the Book?

We can't say simply 'no, we are not people of the book' because we have a book – the Bible. It is the duty of every single Christian to study and understand this book as well as they can manage. We neglect it at our peril. Yes, some of it – perhaps quite a lot of it – is difficult or obscure. But we are called to engage with it and to wrestle with it, even if in the end we have to concede that there are parts of it we just won't fully grasp, at least not in this life. We cannot simply say that we are not people of the book: because this is it.

But we also can't say simply 'yes, we are people of the book'. Because this book does not love us. It does not forgive us our sins. It is God that does those things. It is God, not the Bible, with whom we hope and trust we will dwell in eternal peace and joy. We worship God, not this book. We are bound together, as we so often proclaim in our liturgy, as "the body of Christ", not as 'the fans of the book'. We are brothers and sisters because we are children of the same heavenly Father. We cannot simply say that we are people of the book: because that is not our defining relationship.

This paradox, that we both are and are not people of the book, arises when we concentrate too much on the book itself. Concentrate instead on our defining relationship, our relationship

with God, and we can begin to see our proper relationship with the book.

As human beings we are finite. We are bounded in time and space, limited by our physical and mental capacities. Our human lives have a beginning and an end, and we cannot know everything there is to know, see everything there is to see, or do everything there is to do. As such, we cannot know God as 'God's-self', as an infinite pure being. God's self-revelation to us is therefore necessarily limited – not by what God is capable of, but by what we are capable of. It is given to some people, on occasion, to have extraordinary experiences of God in visions and in voices. It is given to most of us, though still only on occasion, to have a less tangible but nevertheless very real sense of the presence of God, of his Spirit moving powerfully within us. But even these moments of revelation are less than complete, and they are fleeting and temporary.

The most complete revelation of God to humanity was in the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity, in the Word of God made flesh, Jesus Christ. Yet even in his complete divinity – "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father" – he was in the Incarnation bounded as we are by his equally complete humanity. That is the weight our simple creedal phrase "and was

made man" carries. When we proclaim that Jesus is alive we proclaim a profound truth, but we do not mean 'alive' in exactly the same way that you and I are. Jesus' earthly existence was, like ours, bounded; and though unlike ours it was not bounded by his death, it was still bounded by his ascension. Unlike those first disciples some two thousand years ago in Palestine, we cannot encounter Jesus walking bodily through our streets. This most complete revelation of God to humanity is still removed from our direct access.

So these particular revelations of God are fleeting or inaccessible. And yet, God calls us into loving relationship with him. Indeed, that is what we are created for – to be in loving relationship with God. To enable that ongoing loving relationship, when other revelations are temporary, we are given by God another source of revelation of himself, one that is always accessible to us – the Bible.

It is in this sense that we can rightly describe the Bible as 'the word of God' or "the word of the Lord". We do not mean that it was somehow magically transmitted by God, word for word, onto the pages in front of us: but rather that through the divinely-inspired work of men and women writing, copying, translating and transmitting the Bible, we are given by God a

revelation of himself that is always available to us. The Bible exists for our "instruction" and "encouragement" in our relationship with the God who reveals himself to us through it. The *words* of the Bible reveal God *the Word* by directing us beyond themselves to him, and especially to that particular revelation of himself in the person of Jesus Christ, the one in whom scripture is fulfilled.

We are the people of God. Our relationship is not with the dead text of a book, but with our living and loving God. Yet this God has given us this book as a revelation of himself. So let us truly be people of it. Let us "hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" it, not for the sake of the book itself, but for the one whom it reveals to us. Let us be people whose lives are so shaped by our relationship with the God who reveals himself through this book, that by our lives we may draw all people to him. Through the work of human beings, God has given us this book as a constant revelation of himself, so let us be people of the book *because* we are truly people of God. Let us hold our Bibles as precious and necessary *because* of the one who they point us to, and who reveals himself to us through them. Then we can truly pray, "for the word of the Lord, thanks be to God".