

Sunday 29th October 2017 (Bible Sunday)

St Faith, Havant

8.00am – Mass & 9.30am – Parish Mass

Nehemiah 8.1-12; Colossians 3.12-17; Matthew 24.30-35

Five hundred years ago, on 31st October 1517, Martin Luther started the Reformation by fixing his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of Wittenburg church; but it didn't have much impact at the time (if indeed it actually happened). What really set things going (and definitely happened) was the Diet of Worms, the great council of church and empire, before whom on 18th April 1521 Luther declared that he rejected all religious authorities other than the Bible. "I am bound by the Scriptures," he said, "and my conscience is captive to the word of God."

From that day to this, Protestant Christianity has rung with the cry of 'sola scriptura' – 'scripture alone'. The words I read in the Bible tell me everything I need. Except that isn't the case, because there's another Protestant slogan which came first: 'Sola fide' – 'faith alone'. The Holy Spirit prompting my conscience tells me everything I need. And immediately that's a challenge; because you can't base your theology on 'faith alone' and *at the same time* on 'scripture alone'. Faith and scripture must each inform the other. What we believe to be right, and what we read in the Bible, must influence each other. The challenge for us is that there aren't any rules about how those two principles should interact.

The Dutch Christian humanist Erasmus was no fan of how Luther and his allies used the Bible. He wrote that they "are like young men who love a girl so immoderately that they imagine they see their beloved wherever they turn, or...like two combatants who, in the heat of a quarrel, turn whatever is at hand into a missile, whether it be a jug or a dish."

We are wise to take Erasmus's insult with a pinch of salt. His two similes, however, do provide us with a way of reflecting on our own interactions of faith and scripture. Do we decide what we believe and interpret the Bible accordingly, or do we use the words of the Bible to define what we believe? Are we lovers, or fighters?

It's a bit of an unfair question. We might lean more toward one tendency over the other. But when it comes to faith and scripture, nobody is just a lover, or just a fighter. We are all a bit of both.

Let's take a couple of extreme examples. On the one hand, the Friday Masowe Church who flourished in Zimbabwe in the 1990s proudly proclaimed that they were 'the Christians who don't read the Bible'. It was just a book, largely irrelevant to the needs of 20th Century Africans. Instead, they claimed, they were directly guided in their hearts by the Holy Spirit. They were Erasmus's ultimate lovers, having done away with the text completely: except that they quoted Bible verses to defend their

non-literary stance. Their 'faith alone' approach was one they justified by appealing to the very Bible they claimed not to need.

On the other hand, we find the kind of Christian fundamentalist who holds that the Bible is absolutely inerrant in every single detail. For this type of Christian, the words in the Bible are literally God's words, every last one of them, so it is impossible that any of them could be historically, mathematically, or scientifically inaccurate: the kind of people who claim that creation began on the evening of 23rd October 4004BC and was completed in 144 hours. They are Erasmus's ultimate fighters, for whom every word of the text is a weapon at their disposal: except that the Bible never claims that kind of mathematical exactitude for itself. Scripture is divinely *inspired*, not divinely *dictated*. Their 'scripture alone' approach can only be justified by appealing to an idea not itself found in scripture.

As I said, these are both extreme examples – but they illustrate that even those who claim to be led by 'faith alone' or by 'scripture alone' do, in fact, need both of these things. Normally things are rather more subtle. Debates about the abolition of slavery provide an example.

The Bible is full of promises of freedom. It proclaims the equality in Christ of all people, and denounces oppression at every turn...and yet, it never once forbids slavery, and contains teaching about how slaves should be treated. So do we approach the Bible as a 'lover', our reading of the text conditioned by our

faithful conviction that slavery must be banned as an affront to God's freedom? Or do we approach it as a 'fighter', our decisions about what should be allowed determined by the fact that the Bible does not ban slavery, and so neither should we? There were faithful Christians on both sides of the debate. Only the benefit of hindsight lets us know which reading of the Bible proved more persuasive.

Lest we think that such examples are confined to history, or to the eccentric extremes of Christianity, consider the current debate in our own Church of England about same-sex marriage. Should the church, *can* the church, do this? How we answer that question depends on how we let faith and scripture interact with each other. Does our faith that God is love, and that everybody is created in his image – principles directly stated in scripture – allow us to interpret some other Bible verses as requiring a new understanding in the light of social and scientific changes over intervening centuries? Or do we take as our starting point that the Bible only mentions marriage in the context of a man and a woman, and contains several verses that appear to forbid certain sexual practices, and form our principles about what we should permit on that basis? I don't have an answer; but I do know that there are faithful Christians on both sides of this debate. I want to be very clear that there is *never* any justification for bigotry or abuse because of someone's sexuality or for any other reason; the command that we should love one another applies – perhaps

especially applies – to those with whom we disagree.

Nevertheless, it is not helpful to pretend that the answer to such a question is self-evidently obvious when it is not.

In truth, this interaction of faith and scripture presents us time and again with questions that do not have easy answers. It is a challenge for all of us, individually and collectively. The Holy Spirit speaks directly to our hearts, and speaks also through the words of the Bible. We can't ignore the Bible and still be Christians. We can't make it say things it doesn't say, and we can't make it *not* say things that it does say – but we also can't pretend that it is a definitive final word on the minutiae of every possible subject. As we heard in our reading from Nehemiah, the book needs interpretation. We need to gain the *sense*, so that we can properly understand the *words*. The Spirit did not stop inspiring the people of God when the Bible was finished. She still inspires and guides us today.

Lover, or fighter? Conviction, or text? Faith, or scripture? The Spirit gives us both, and we must pay attention to both. We all need to be both lovers *and* fighters. But there are no rules about how that works itself out, and there are no easy answers. None of us has a monopoly on the Holy Spirit. Through perseverance in prayer, in reading our Bibles, and in being attentive to God's voice, we will be able to draw our own conclusions: but we should always remember that other

Christians may draw other conclusions. They are still our brothers and sisters in Christ, and we are called to love them and engage with them as such. In the end, after all our prayer and study and reflecting, perhaps all that each of us can do is to echo what Martin Luther is alleged to have said to that Diet of Worms: "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen."