

SERMON FROM COVENTRY CATHEDRAL

PREACHER	Kathryn Fleming
DATE	26 October 2014
EVENT	The Cathedral Eucharist
READINGS	Colossians 3:12-17; Matthew 24:30-35
THEME	Bible Sunday

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

That's a pretty confident assertion – even for Jesus.

We can assume that he weighed his words carefully, that he knew that they would make a life-changing difference to his hearers there and then – and to all that heard them thereafter...but how could he be so sure that those words would survive?

I'm pretty sure that the carpenter from Nazareth did not foresee the printing press...that as he spoke he was not reflecting on the day when the Bible would be the world's number one best-seller...but for all that, his words point to an important truth.

Jesus was – and is – the great communicator, the one who translates, if you like, the nature of a God beyond our understanding into a God close at hand, telling stories, asking questions...using **our** language to reveal his truth.

“My words will not pass away...” for they point to the eternal...to a reality beyond all words, all understanding.

But - supposing they did...tomorrow.

Supposing some cataclysmic event removed every single Bible, not just from this Cathedral but from every church and school, every home and library, every single corner of the world.

What would we miss?

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets,² but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son,^{*}

God's truth has been revealed in the person of Christ...so do we really need the stories that preceded him?

How would you feel if they went missing?

I wonder if you'd notice – and if so, why...

I mean, it's extraordinary.

In this year of grace 2014, with all the scientific marvels of the past decades, with all the technological advances that have transformed our world, here we are still reading a book whose earliest texts were put together four or five centuries before Homer wrote the Odyssey...

And we read without a trace of irony – with such high seriousness that everyone falls silent as week by week in this wonderful building, we hear stories of times so utterly different and distant from our own that there seems almost no point of connection.

Except, of course, the people.

They are all too familiar.

Rulers who went off the rails and did dreadful things

Nations that fought, conquered or were conquered in their turn

Men and women in the grip of love and hate, fear and jealousy, family feuds and national disasters.

People just like us...

So – on one level, that might be sufficient reason for persevering with this ancient library.

We find ourselves in its pages – and learn fresh approaches to the here and now from the perspective of history. The slogan “All human life is here” was not produced to sell the Bible – and there are all too many ways in which we can recognise recurring patterns of human behaviour to lament or to emulate.

But that's not really the point, is it?

Because, of course, that library of books that we call the Bible is the history of a very particular relationship, and a particular conversation....for it is an account of the relationship of God with God's people.

Though Christians are not the only “people of the book”, we do have a particular identity as a faith community gathered around and formed by this collection of writings.

We allow these writings to have a unique place in our worship – and should surely allow them the same importance in our lives.

It's true, of course, that when we say, as we did just a few moments ago "This is the word of the Lord" we may have quite different understandings of what that means...but we surely agree that God can speak to us through the pages of this book of books.

That's not always a comfortable experience – and indeed, nobody could claim that the Bible is always an enjoyable read.

It's tempting to gloss over the awkward parts – both those that tell of unspeakable cruelties and those that give us far more information than we ever needed about the dietary codes of a nomadic race. Part of the role of the lectionary, with its daily portion of Scripture, is to ensure that we engage with the hard stuff, like it or not...for even the worst behaviour of Old Testament kings, the angriest excursions of the psalmist aren't really so different in essence from the messier contents of our hearts.

It can be tempting, though, to shy away from those bits that hit home just a little too hard...those words that remind us that the word of God is indeed active as any two-edged sword...and that sometimes the guidance and truth we need to hear is a far cry from the easy consolation we would like.

Sometimes we abuse the Bible – using its words as weapons against our brothers and sisters in Christ, distorting the message of Scripture to judge or to condemn...

I've witnessed some really disturbing games of Bible tennis, with texts being hit to and fro, each protagonist determined to use them to prove their point, to have the last word.

Can we claim such exercises as "The word of the Lord?"

I really don't think so.

Because, you see, I'm convinced that God's word to us is love.

Love is the fulfilment of everything that God wants to say, the ultimate truth of God's word.

That word of God, God's word of love, is found above all in Jesus himself, who lived and taught and died a life of love, so that the love of God could become reality for everyone.

And in Jesus' rising from death, God showed that love is the greatest power in the world.

That's the message and the meaning.

The written word leading us to the living Word – the One who is love incarnate

This is the beginning and end of the Scriptures: it is on God's love that everything – EVERYTHING – depends.

So "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" because, you see, our God is one who longs to communicate, and uses words, ordinary fragile, changeable words, to make himself known to us.

Remember Terry Waite, sustained through long captivity by the words of Scripture he had learned decades before...words dwelling in him as an antidote to hatred and despair.

Remember Provost Howard, shaping our ministry here as two words slipped from heart to mind on that November morning

God spoke to them through words they had absorbed, perhaps almost without knowing.

God speaks to us, through those same words, which we are free to study, to explore, to ponder whenever we like.

Take those words seriously.

Each holds an infinity of meanings, and even the most familiar of texts has fresh treasures to offer if you spend time immersed in it, opening yourself to new possibilities.

There is so much to discover, but the overarching meaning is, always, non negotiably, love.

So, let's approach Scripture expecting to be changed by the encounter, confident that the story of those men and women of long ago will become our story...and that, like them, we can be swept up in God's great love story, through which he woos humanity.

For surely every Sunday must be Bible Sunday...every day a Bible day.

The Bible is precious, priceless, inspired.

It deserves our best attention for behind the words on the page is the living reality of the Word made flesh.

Let's, then, join in with the story.

We will misunderstand and get things wrong – but that's fine for errors are part of learning.

The Bible needs us, if it is to have any existence beyond the sterility of the page.

We need the Bible, if we are to gain insights into the ways of God for it is a book that will lead us to God and help us to engage with God in bringing in His kingdom.

It is a gift, to be savoured and celebrated, for it comes laden with the love of God.

Thanks be to God!