

# "Bible Sunday: Count on it"

25<sup>th</sup> October 2009

Rev Brian Senior

## Readings:

Isaiah 55:1-11

Psalm 19:7-14

John 5:36b-47

## Sermon

### Put up umbrella!

One thing you can always rely upon is the unreliability of the British weather.

Yesterday, for instance, the weather here was meant to be light rain turning to grey cloud ... tell that to Alistair Johnston, who spent a few hours getting soaked to the skin yesterday, cleaning green algae off the fascia boards on the north side of the Church.

How often have you gone out on a sunny day, reassured by an upbeat weather forecast, without a coat or an umbrella, and ended up getting soaked?

On the other hand, you can go out all prepared for a typical English summer in wellies and waterproofs, and end up feeling a complete chump because you're stuck with them all day in the sweltering heat.

One thing you can rely on ... if it rains hard enough, it will get wet in here! Enough water pours through the ceiling in the office corridor, on a wet day, to take a decent shower. Until we get the roof fixed, I'm afraid you simply cannot rely on it to keep the rain out.

Today is Bible Sunday ... and today we are thinking about the Bible as something *you really can rely on*. In an age when we cannot be sure we can trust our banks to keep our money safe ... and we cannot be sure we can trust our politicians to tell the truth ... and now we wonder if we can even trust the post office to deliver our mail ...

... what we really need in the Church today is a renewed certainty that the Word of God is something you can *really* trust.

I was down at TN2 on Thursday with the lads who come to the Horizon project there ... mostly boys who are school refusers or who have been excluded. They were talking about not believing in what the Bible says about God, because he doesn't do what they think he ought to do to sort the world out ... but then they have some pretty confused ideas about God, and some pretty confused ideas about what the Bible says.

What about you? Do you trust the Bible as God's truth?

There have been a lot of attacks on the Bible in recent years, and maybe some of us have lost some of our confidence in the Bible as the word of God:

- The Da Vinci code a couple of years ago tried to convince us that it was all part of some sort of conspiracy.
- Richard Dawkins has called God himself 'a delusion' and many people seem to

have taken on board what he said, without examining the evidence.

- Some people find the Bible confusing because they don't know how to read it with understanding ... whether or not they are meant to take everything in the Bible literally, or how they are meant to apply it to their daily lives.
- There are times when any of us can find the Bible a bit overwhelming, because parts of it are hard to understand, and we don't really know where to start.

Sometimes people set out to read the Bible from the beginning, so they start at Genesis, and find it not too hard to relate to the accounts of family feuds and wars and God's rescue plan for his people ... but then they get into Leviticus and it seems to be full of blood and sacrifice and laws we don't understand, and then they get bogged down and lose heart. They begin to doubt that they can really count on the Bible to help them with the real-life issues they face from day to day.

The people of Israel at the time of the exile were in a similar predicament. Isaiah the prophet had warned them in graphic detail of what was to come ... that because of their sinful disobedience they would come under the judgment of God, and be taken away into Exile in Babylon ... and so they had been, and so it was.

The Babylonian empire had conquered Judah and Jerusalem, the temple had been desecrated, and much of the city left in ruins. Their leaders were deported, and the nation was disgraced. They were meant to be God's chosen people, and here they were, fifty years on, strangers in a strange land, and serving their pagan masters.

What about all that stuff in the Bible about God choosing them, loving them, and always watching over them? Could they still count on the Bible now everything had gone wrong?

But Isaiah's prophesy of judgment was also a prophecy of hope. The overall tone from Isaiah 40 to 55 is one of encouragement and anticipation. The prophet urges the people to trust the God of Israel, because he will set them free and enable them to return to the Promised Land.

The problem was that the people didn't know whether to believe it. After fifty years, most of the exiles had been born in Babylon. They had, to some extent, lost their identity as Israelites. In much the same way as some of the immigrant communities in this country have lost their roots, and wonder where they really belong, the faith and tradition of their parents and grandparents seemed distant and irrelevant.

It must have seemed to them that either the gods of Babylon were stronger than the God of Israel, or else he had given up on them. If God had saved their ancestors from Egypt, why hadn't he saved them from the Babylonian invaders?

Some of them thought it was more sensible to turn to the local gods. Others, like Daniel, remembered that the prophets warned many times that their country would be overrun unless the people and their leaders turned back to the One True God ... and they remained faithful even if those around them were disillusioned and hopeless.

But then things started to happen just as the prophet had said. From Isaiah 40 onwards he had told them that God would liberate them from oppression. They had served their punishment, and now God was going to rescue them and bring them home ... and he was going to do this through Cyrus, the ruler of Persia, who would defeat Babylon and grant the Israelites their freedom to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple.

It's all there in Isaiah 40:1-2:

*"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins."*

It wasn't that God was too weak to stop the Babylonians ... in fact, he was in control of the whole business. He had raised up the Babylonians to punish his people, but now he had raised up the Persians to free them. They could count on their God, because what he SAID would happen DID happen ... and what he said was GOING to happen, WOULD happen.

How did they know that God's word could be trusted? ... because it came true!

Just as Isaiah prophesied ... and you can read it from Chapter 40 up to our reading today in Chapter 55 ... God did bring them out of Babylon to a renewed freedom in the promised land. He raised up men like Ezra and Nehemiah to bring them hope and to lead them ... and under Cyrus, king of Persia they were given the opportunity and the resources to restore the temple and rebuild Jerusalem.

How can we know that God's word can be trusted? ... because it is accurate and true!

Not only can we think of the many prophecies in the Old Testament which were fulfilled in Jesus ... think about how accurately Isaiah 53 describes his arrest and trial and death ... but we can also see how accurately the Bible describes the human condition.

The Bible teaches us that we are made in the image of God, but that image is marred and distorted by sin. If we are honest with ourselves and with God, we are not even what we wish we were.

All around us we see plenty of evidence of the human capacity for good ... we discover god-like qualities of love and truth in people of every type ... but we also see all too many examples of the greed and selfishness which spoils those godly qualities. Think of the endless revelations about MPs expenses, or the grim reports of child abuse in the papers this last week.

The words of the prophet (Isaiah 55:6f) still stand for us today:

*"Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon."*

The message of the Bible is that we struggle to be everything we want to be, but we only find our true identity in Jesus Christ. This has been the experience of Christian men and women down the centuries, who have come to trust in the reliability of the Bible because it describes our situation as it really is ... lost in sin and far from God - and it offers the only answer to our situation that really works ... forgiveness through Jesus Christ, and a new life in union with him.

Isaiah goes on to compare God's Word to rain and snow (55:10f):

*"As the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me*

*empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."*

If God's word was simply words on a page or preached from a lectern, then so what? If you listen to me today and think "nice sermon Vicar" ... or even if you have less charitable thoughts ... and you go home and forget about it and it makes no difference tomorrow, then what's the point?

God's Word is intended to be a force for good in the world. It has a life of its own ... a dynamism which transcends the person who reads it or the one who preaches it ... it has power to change our lives, and it has power to change the world.

Snow and rain fall indiscriminately. It doesn't matter if we are good or bad, it still rains on us. God pours out his blessing on believers and unbelievers, or the righteous and on the sinner. He is extravagant in his generosity ... in the way he gives his Word and his gifts to the world and its people.

But even rain can be wasted. Think back to our Harvest service where we learned about Stidia's village in Uganda, where building a water tank for the village changed the lives of the girls, especially, because they no longer had to take the long and dangerous journey down the mountain to collect all the water they needed.

Rain that falls on crops needs to be taken up by the roots in order to nourish the plants. In the same way, we need to soak up God's Word if it is going to bring change in our lives. We can let the Word wash over us, and fall to the ground and be wasted ... or we can drink deeply of God's Word so that it can nourish our spirits and renew us.

It goes without saying, I hope, that our God is a great God. He can achieve what he chooses to achieve with or without our cooperation and help. It may be true, what people often say, that 'God has no hands but our hands' ... but that doesn't mean that he is limited by our obedience.

The exiles in Babylon were given an opportunity. The Persians arrived; and Cyrus, their leader, issued an edict allowing the Israelites to return to Jerusalem ... but they had to decide whether or not to take up the offer, and some stayed where they were. God gave them the opportunity, but he didn't give them a lift!

God gives us opportunities today ... opportunities for service and opportunities to witness ... opportunities to step out in faith and do something inspiring for God. But it is up to us whether or not we take them up.

In the same way, we can open ourselves up to God's refreshing Word and let it touch our lives and take us deeper into him, or we can refuse to drink and remain arid and shriveled.

We have to choose.

But there is a problem.

We ought not to be surprised if sometimes we find the Bible does not speak into our contemporary situation without us doing a fair bit of work. The Old Testament comes from a world of between two and a half and four thousand years ago, and we can't just take what happened to someone in ancient Canaan and apply it directly to our own lives in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain. Things have changed!

This doesn't mean that the Bible is any less true ... only that we need to understand the

context in which it was written, in order to apply it to the context in which we find ourselves.

Even the early Christians sometimes had this trouble with the Old Testament ... which was, after all, already very old by their time. The Law of Moses said, for example, that the Israelites were only to eat meat from which all the blood had been drained ... but Christians today don't generally buy kosher meat.

The early Church told Gentile Christians that *they* should not eat meat which had been sacrificed to idols, but many lived in a society where much of the meat from the market had been offered as sacrifices at pagan temples, and Paul had to tell them that this didn't matter, because idols weren't real.

If we followed the letter of the law of Deuteronomy, we would never wear clothes made from mixed fibres, and we would stone our disobedient sons. That doesn't mean that these laws are not important, just that we have to understand them in the light of our own times.

We need to ask God to help us discern what we should take literally, and what principles we should learn from those things which we should not take literally. We also need to be humble enough to recognise that there are some things we don't yet understand, which is why we need Bible Scholars to help us.

If we use the Bible in the wrong way, we will get ourselves into a mess:

- The Bible is not a sort of holy horoscope. We cannot stick in a pin and expect God to direct us to what he wants to say to us today. That is lazy and presumptuous.
- The Bible is much more than a collection of promises. Of course it has a great deal to encourage us, but it also constantly reminds us of the need to be faithful disciples.
- The Bible is more complicated than a book of instructions or a service manual. We can't look up all our questions in the index and find the verse that gives us the answer.

To understand the Bible properly we need to study it in detail ... to set one passage alongside another so that we can get the whole picture, and avoid getting things out of context. We will never get enough of that just by listening to sermons.

What we need is a daily diet of Scripture, so that we grow day by day to understand the things of God. Then, when disturbing questions or difficult situations come our way, we will have the resources at our fingertips to understand and to respond as we should.

Perhaps what we need most of all is to get an understanding of the overall message of the Bible, which we can sum up in this way:

- It starts with creation, where God blesses perfection, with freewill included.
- It falters in a garden, where a man and a woman reveal their weakness and sinfulness.
- It struggles through a desert, where God's love reaches out, but people reject him.
- It is redeemed on a rubbish tip, where Jesus paid the price for our freedom.
- It is renewed in another garden, where God's power is released in resurrection glory.

- It ends in a restored creation, where sin is forgiven and death is defeated.

As we follow the story of God and his people, we gain a deeper understanding of how his Word nourishes and nurtures us, and, as Isaiah put it:

*"It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire."*

To be truly open to the Word of God, so that it can do in us what God intends and desires, we need to expose ourselves to its truth. The more we read, hear, discuss and grow to understand God's Word, the more God the Holy Spirit will be able to challenge our thinking, mould our values, shape our attitudes and actions, and change our lives.

This is what St Paul means when he writes in Romans 12 (v2):

*"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds."*

For this to happen, we need to soak ourselves in God's Word ... not just through sermons, but through personal Bible Study, and through exploring the Bible together with others.

This is why for many year Beryl (Round) has organised Bible Reading Notes, which help people to read the Bible in an organised way, so that they can get the best from Daily Readings. Heather (Payne) has taken that on from Beryl ... why not have a word with her about what might suit you best?

This is also why I believe Home Groups are so vital, because they give us an opportunity to ask questions and to help one-another to grapple with God's Word and deepen our understanding, and so to apply it to our lives.

Perhaps my umbrella is not such a good idea, after all? We can see and hear the rain but it doesn't touch us ... just as we can read and hear God's Word and let it wash over us. Sometimes it's good to go out in the rain and enjoy getting wet! Think of summer rain which cools you on a warm day ... or catching snowflakes on your tongue in the winter.

Jesus criticised the Pharisees for not letting God's Word touch them. He said (John 5:39f):

*"You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life."*

What we definitely do need to do is to let God's Word soak into us and drench us ... to come out from under the umbrella, open the book, and get it inside us.