

## A Reflection on Reading and Re-reading the Bible

The readings this Sunday reflect on why we have ‘readings’ in the first place: they are a meditation from within the Scriptures on the nature and meaning of a faith which is moulded by a ‘Scriptural vision’. They explain why we read the Bible, and then we *re-read* it – we carry on reading in a way which never comes to an end. That is to say, we never read the Bible with a view that our understanding of what it really means is now *complete*; but, rather, we *carry on reading it* so that our understanding of its meaning becomes ever deeper and wiser and more *mature*.



Perhaps this is why the Apostle Paul begins one of his own reflections on the purpose and function of the Scriptural testimony by urging those of us who have begun to be strong in faith to be especially attentive to the support of those who seem to be *weak*. As mature readers of the Text we are to help those who are weak to

grow in their own reading, reflection, and understanding:

*We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbour for the good purpose of building up the neighbour. For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, ‘The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.’ For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.* Romans 15.1-6

Paul goes on to describe a number of functions within the process of reading the Scriptures. Our reading is a deeply serious matter. It begins, as we might expect, with *instruction*. We read the Bible in order to *learn about God*. But it does not stop there. We read also for *encouragement*. There is a *moral* quality to our meditation on the Scriptures. Reading and re-reading the Bible – especially as we recognise the process within ourselves of being *moulded and remoulded* by an on-going pattern of

reading and reflection – *makes us better people*. This in turn nurtures within us the growth of *hope* – and our reading has a *spiritual* quality. The Bible strengthens us in soul. It banishes fear and despair. It is why we recognise the Word of God as a word of *life*. The Apostle continues that this reading activates within us a *voice which glorifies God*. The Bible is the foundation and source of our *prayer* and our *worship and praise*. It is the gateway through which we perceive the *Vision of God*. We begin to see as God sees, ‘no longer from a human point of view’ (cf 2 Corinthians 5.16); our own mind and consciousness are slowly replaced with the mind and the consciousness of Jesus Christ himself (cf 1 Corinthians 2.16): as Paul puts it elsewhere, ‘it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me’ (Galatians 2.20). So the *quality* of our reading of the Scriptures is of sublime importance for us.

At the heart of this discipline of prayerful and reflective reading is a quiet attentiveness to the inner meaning of the words – not only a superficial sense of what they seem to say, but the *voice of God* as it becomes clarified through our careful readings and re-reading, and our comparison of one text with another. Slowly a deep and resilient sense of *wonder* opens up within us, as we begin to discern the very mind of God. It is why the spirit of *awe* and of *glory* – a sense of *spiritual delight* – is also part of the fruit of our reading. Perhaps this is the most important of all the fruits of our reading, the sign that our reading has been dependable and true.

*Your testimonies are wonderful; therefore my soul keeps them.*

*The opening of your word gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.*

*I open my mouth and draw in my breath, as I long for your  
commandments.*

*Turn to me and be gracious to me, as is your way with those who love  
your name.*

*Order my steps by your word, and let no wickedness have dominion over  
me.*

*Redeem me from earthly oppressors so that I may keep your  
commandments.*

*Show the light of your countenance upon your servant and teach me your  
statutes.*

*My eyes run down with streams of water, because the wicked do not keep  
your law.*

Psalm 119.129-136