

# Sunday Sermon

**Revd Canon Charles Jenkin – 25<sup>th</sup> October 2020 – Bible Sunday**

*Nehemiah 8.1-4a,8-12; Psalm 119.9-16; Colossians 3.12-17; Matthew 24.30-35*

Today we celebrate the place of the Bible in the Christian faith, and the story it tells. It is the story of the tradition of faith in God, in which we also stand today. It is a tradition that goes back some 3,500 years. It starts with the call of Abraham, to leave his familiar and successful life and, taking all his possessions, set off in faith to a new place to which God promises to lead him. There are of course various chapters before Abraham in the Bible, but those are there as a result of later reflection. They reflect later interest about earlier beginnings.

The real Bible story starts with the call of Abraham. He settles into a new place, but his family get into trouble and fall into slavery. Then comes the great salvation event of the Old Testament, with Moses leading the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt, with a powerful sense that they are being both called by God and saved by God.

This is the fundamental theme of the whole Bible. The God of this great tradition of faith in which we stand today, is a God who calls people and saves people, both as individuals and as nations, and continues to do so today. We also are called by God, individually and together; we also are saved from slavery to human sin and weakness; and we also are called to go on to and discover new life in unfamiliar and new places. The story of the Bible continues in us today, and in the Church today. It is our story too, and that is why we read our Bibles.

The next major event in the story is David and the establishment of the Kingdom of Israel with David as the first king of Israel. It is a time of great triumph and celebration for the Israelite nation. But it doesn't last long, and the story goes pretty much downhill after that. Successive kings fail God, many of the people fail God, and the kingdom disintegrates and is conquered. All its leaders are taken into exile, and much of the rest of the Old Testament is taken up with what it means to trust in the faithfulness of God, when so much has gone so terribly wrong.

This is the time of the prophets, starting with Isaiah, and their great theme is the faithfulness of God to his people in the face of the unfaithfulness of the people. The prophets call people to repentance, but more deeply they grapple with what it means to keep trusting in God in the face of disaster. In this the prophets explore a pervasive aspect of the story of faith in the God of Abraham, Moses and David. We stand in this story today as well. It is our struggle and our story too. How do we go on trusting God when things go wrong?

The story of the Old Testament is also a story of spiritual failure. It is the story of the ultimate failure of religious systems which are based rigidly on rules and laws. The underlying problem is that human beings are just too weak, too foolish and too self-centred to live up to the rules. In the end God had to do something different, as he had of course always known that he would. He sent Jesus, to rescue his people from their sin, and to save them from themselves.

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And so with Jesus the story enters a new age, the age of grace and Spirit. No longer are God's people doomed to try and fail to keep God's laws, but a new dynamic is at work, where even higher values are very much in view. But in the age of grace and spirit, God does not hold failure to keep these values against his people. In the age of grace and Spirit, God's people are generously forgiven and in return are called to generously forgive one another. This is the true defining moment in the whole Bible story, and why he says in the Gospel reading for today that his words will never pass away.

It is a fundamental change of spiritual paradigm, a spiritual conversion, that is often reflected in the experience of Christians through the ages. We see it worked out in the New Testament particularly in the writings of St Paul, who often contrasts the two religious systems of law and grace. But in the life of every Christian there is often a growing realisation that the grace of God is more than sufficient and we don't have constantly to beat ourselves up for our failures and failings. Because we are being held in the loving grace of God.

And so the story of the Bible reaches its climax in the story of Jesus. He transforms the spiritual paradigm and once again calls people to new life, and once again frees and saves them from what binds them. He calls us too; and he frees and saves us too. We read our Bibles so that we too can enter into this divine story and become part of it. It is a story of faith, a tradition of faith, in the faithfulness of God.

But as we enter into it more deeply, we discover that it is not so much the story of humanity's search for God, but the story of God's search for you and for me, and of his constant generosity and his constant faithfulness. Jesus came to teach us about this God, and indeed his words will never pass away, because they are the eternal truth about God. Amen.

CJ. 25.10.20