

In the name of the Father and the of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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A friend of mine was taught by a New Testament scholar who used to spend some of his evenings going out to Deanery Synod meetings.

Now, despite how it sounds, he wasn't a glutton for punishment.

He did so because he thought people had a genuine hunger to know more about the New Testament.

Now, he was probably a more liberal interpreter of scripture, but he was a serious academic. Mainstream. Well respected. And he enjoyed questions. He enjoyed exploring the Bible seriously and openly.

One night he was at a Synod meeting, he gave his talk, and at the end took was taking questions.

As he did so, there was man in the audience who put his hand up. He was crying.

When he was asked to speak the man said:

'Professor, I want to thank you. Because for almost 20 years, I have believed in my heart what it is that you've been saying this evening, about the scriptures, about the person Jesus and his life, what it means for us...but I've never had the confidence to say it, because my vicar would be livid! But you have expressed it for me tonight, and you're a man of faith. I want to thank you.

The man was crying, so powerful was this moment in his life of faith.

All of a sudden there was a voice from the back: 'JOHN!'

The man turned round...it was his vicar, who had come in late, so the man hadn't seen that he was there.

The vicar said [compassionately] 'John, I've believed these things for *over* 20 years, but I've never preached them...because I thought *you* would be hurt'.

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Today is known as Bible Sunday, the day in the church year where we celebrate and explore more intentionally, the gift of holy scripture.

And for this day I am thankful, because it allows us to inject a bit more honesty into the discussion.

Too often, churches don't talk about the Bible. Or if they do, it is more in the tone of: this is what it is, this is what it says. End of.

But what I want to say to you today is that talking about these things, about faith, what we believe, what we read, asking questions...well this isn't being unfaithful.

Jesus was *always* engaging people with their questions, and this is what we ought to be doing as a church.

We ought to be asking questions, exploring faith and life together, learning more about God so we can learn more about ourselves, who we are called to be.

To ask questions doesn't mean we don't have faith.

Because the opposite of faith is more likely to be certainty.

And actually, if we look at scripture, one thing we can say with a *great* sense of certainty, is that the people who wound Jesus up the most were the certain ones.

So, on this Bible Sunday, let us try a resetting of how we approach Scripture.

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As adults in particular, I think we are too ready to listen for truth in Scripture in a particular way. And in doing so we can develop low expectations of language, and even of God.

We often see Scripture as some sort of helpful utensil, to point to things, or to clarify reason with.

The way I see it, it's as if we listen or read Scripture with our BBC News ears on.

As if the Bible was read by a Newsreader on the 6 o'clock news.

We listen, expecting to hear truth, but coming our way as facts – things that have happened, with some added commentary that we're able to assess for accuracy.

But if we always do this (which is so easily done, particularly in a world of Google, social media and 24 hour news) I fear we will often miss the point.

I think instead, a better set of ears to have on, might be the sort we use when we hear the words 'once upon a time'.

Perhaps the sorts of ears that children have. Maybe that's what Jesus meant when he called us to come to him as if we were children.

Because, similarly to how our ears may prick up when we hear the 6 o'clock news begin, when we hear the words 'once upon a time', we're still expectant of truth...maybe even more expectant...

But to those words, we tune in in a different way. When we hear those words we don't only tune in our mind, but our heart too. And through this, different levels of meaning are revealed and understood.

We begin to see, I think, the love between the lines.

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Now if this approach sounds a bit inconclusive, it's probably worth reminding ourselves that scripture isn't the only, or even the most important, place of revelation in the Christian tradition, despite how some might approach it.

We must be careful not to make an idol of the Bible, or expect it to carry too much of our baggage.

Because our faith does not rest in letters. The words of scripture do not remain simply words on a page. Because those prophetic words become the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ.

And so seeing and reading the love between the lines, asking those questions, deepening our faith, opening our hearts to the study and meaning of the Bible, really means opening ourselves to receiving God's gift of himself, in Jesus Christ, the word made *flesh*.

Scripture, then, must be read around what we know of Jesus Christ, and that must shape *our* lives.

Because when we do, our typical notions of God are shattered.

No longer is he a distant bearded white man, who can be lured down from heaven to do nice things for us if we're very, very polite, and behave extra well.

No, in Jesus Christ we see that what we are dealing with, is a God who can't help overflowing, bursting into the world he has made, to give us nothing less than the divine life itself.

We're dealing with a God, in other words, who doesn't have to be persuaded to be interested in us, to love us, to give us life – you might as well persuade a waterfall to be wet.

No, in Jesus Christ God *rains upon us*, not by force or command...but by a solidarity, an identification, so deep, so serious and so total, that we can't help but feel love, relationship, connection, meaning.

And because of *that*, we can say that when we see Jesus, we see God. God who values us, our humanity, our very lives...beyond all imagining.

This is the gift that we celebrate today. Because this is the gift that the Bible, indeed Bible Sunday, ultimately points to: God in Jesus Christ.

And it is to him which our eyes must look, it is to him that our hearts must move, this day and always.

Amen.