

We're lucky at St Peter's. Our regular Sunday service still has an Old Testament reading, an Epistle, a Gospel, and a psalm. Many churches don't do that any more. The psalm went long ago, the Old Testament reading soon followed it, and their congregations now exist on a meagre diet of epistle and gospel only. I've even been to some where what St Paul says in his epistles is given more priority than what Jesus said and did. The argument seems to be that the Old Testament is about the old covenant, Jesus came to establish a new covenant and Paul has elaborated this so we understand it better, so we can just ignore the old one. Unless, of course, it is more to do with getting home a bit earlier in time for Sunday lunch.

So I started on this sermon for Bible Sunday with a verse from Psalm 119, only to discover that this morning we are not having one – though if we were it would have been part of Psalm 119! Some days I just can't win. But as it is Bible Sunday you get the verse anyway: 'Your word is a lantern to my feet and a light upon my path.'

Psalm 119 is the longest psalm in the Bible – two and a half times as long as the next-longest one, Psalm 78. It's an extraordinary piece of writing, almost certainly not written by David (who was the author of some of the psalms but definitely not all of them and not this one). The author was a scholar who studied 'the Law'; the Jewish law set down in what are now the first five books of our Bible. He – because it would have been a man; Jewish women of the time didn't spend their lives studying the scriptures – he also seems to have had a fascination for puzzles and word-games. The psalm is in 22 sections each of eight verses; each section begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet and the sections are arranged in Hebrew alphabetical order. Every verse contains a mention of the law, commandments, decrees, ordinances, precepts, word, testimonies, statutes, judgements. A lot of work must have gone into its construction.

Even more work lay behind its content. The writer devoted his life to studying the law. Maybe he was a young man wrestling with its complexities for the first time. he stays awake at night puzzling over it; his eyes go bleary with reading it; he argues with others about it; people jeer at him because he is so committed to studying and living by it. Even today, 2,500 years later, there are communities of ultra-orthodox Jews where the young men do nothing but study and debate the law in minute detail. Maybe the author was an old man who has spent his whole life studying and teaching the law; who has tried to live by its precepts – tried and failed and tried again; who has been derided, ostracized and threatened by people who resent the example he has set but who has found ultimate solace in a life of law-abiding poverty: 'The law of your mouth is dearer to me than a hoard of gold and silver'.

The entire psalm is about the primacy of the law, the tribulations to be endured in its study, the promises made to those who follow it and the joy that comes to those who observe it faithfully. For the writer, of course, the law was the law of Moses. But the same things are true for us as we read our Bibles. The ten commandments are as fundamental to our lives as they were for that struggling scholar, and just as difficult to follow. We may be gently ridiculed or even thought to be a bit weird by people who don't share our commitment, but there are places in the world where our lives would be in danger if our faith were known. We believe in the promise of justice, mercy and salvation that the Bible contains, and we too find comfort as well as challenge in its words. 'My lips shall pour forth your praise...my tongue shall sing of your word', says the psalmist, and

that is exactly what we are doing this morning. 'I have longed for your salvation, O Lord, and your law is my delight. Let my soul live and it shall praise you, and let your judgements be my help.'

Jesus, of course, was well-versed in the Jewish scriptures. He studied them as a boy and young man; when he stayed behind in the temple at the age of 12 he was debating the law with the teachers and asking them questions. He could always challenge the scribes and Pharisees; they could never get the better of him in an argument although they tried repeatedly to trip him up. But he absolutely condemned their interpretation of the law which was, as he put it, faithful to the letter but not the spirit; which ignored the love and salvation God offered and instead emphasised ritual detail and minute observance. Jesus didn't condemn the law itself; he condemned the narrow-minded, blinkered idolatry of those whose practice of it trampled on the rights and dignity and even the lives of others. The law of the Old Testament was expressed in terms of the culture and time when first God gave the law to Moses and then the prophets and wisdom writers interpreted it. Jesus's re-statement of the commandments re-established God's message for everywhere and for all time: 'Love God and love your neighbour'.

Last week Susan and our clergy had a staff 'away day'. For part of the time we each read and talked about a Bible passage which was particularly significant in our own Christian journey. Fr David chose a psalm. Susan went for the Epistle to the Romans. Fr Harold selected Naaman. Fr Adam talked about the body of Christ. I nearly picked the last three chapters from the Book of Job, but finally settled for the 'dry bones' from Ezekiel. Two Old Testament examples; two from the New Testament. 'Lord, you have searched me out and known me'. 'We are the body of Christ'. 'Nothing shall separate us from the love of God'. 'Now I know there is no God in all the earth except in Israel'. 'I will put breath in you and you shall live'. Each of us with a word to be a lantern to our feet and a light on our path. And so it will be for you as you read the Bible and take it into your heart. As the psalmist says: 'I will tell of your testimonies even before kings, and will not be ashamed.'