

It's a long time since I was at school. But when I was, we had one lesson every week which was quite stunningly dull. These days there is 'RE' – Religious Education, which tries to give children some understanding of the different perspectives and practices of the world's major religions. But at my school we had 'Scripture', and that was exactly what it was. Week by week we ground our way through different sections of the Bible. We drew maps of St Paul's missionary journeys – it seemed to be much more important to get the map correct than to understand what he was actually telling the Galatians and Ephesians and Colossians. There was an entire year when we ploughed through Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, trying to remember from one week to the next which was Abimelech and which was Abiather, why Doeg killed the priests, and which of all those remarkably interchangeable kings whose names began with 'J' (you know – Jehoash and Jehoshaphat, Jeroboam, Joash, Josiah, Jehoiakim and so on) did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and which ones cut down the sacred poles, destroyed the high places and restored proper temple worship. So even though I also went to Sunday School and heard all about parables and miracles and the Christmas and Easter stories (and Paul's missionary journeys all over again), my relationship with the Bible got off to a very shaky start.

Today's first reading (from the book of Nehemiah, which is not one most of us are very familiar with), is about the Israelites, newly returned from fifty years of exile during which they had been cut off from their ancestral lands and from their culture and traditions (which, in any case, had been scarcely observed for hundreds of years before that). They had rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and reconstructed the temple. Ezra, the high priest, had rediscovered (or possibly re-created from memory) their holy books, and now he read them to the people every day for a week. These books are the first five books in our Bible, which Jews call the Torah – the books of the law. They describe how God made his covenant with the Children of Israel and set out his laws for them to follow. Ezra's reading touched something which had been deeply buried in the hearts of the Israelites. They were rediscovering their roots, re-connecting with their traditions, hearing an authentic proclamation of what God had done for their ancestors and what he expected from them. Most of them were hearing it for the first time, and yet it had always been theirs. No wonder they wept – and feasted.

Two thousand years later, something rather similar happened. The great Protestant reformers dragged the Latin Bible out of the hands of the Catholic church, made new translations from the original Greek and Hebrew into local languages, and – with the help of the newly-invented printing press - made it available to ordinary people to read. The idea that everyone should and must read and interpret the Bible for themselves was revolutionary, and in England it was also heretical. First Wycliffe and then Tyndale translated the Bible into English. Wycliffe Bibles were outlawed in 1408; if you had a copy you could be burned at the stake. Many people were. Even 125 years later, Tyndale had to work in Germany because of this prohibition. His Bibles were smuggled into England. He was eventually arrested and executed, but shortly afterwards one of his assistants, Miles Coverdale, produced another translation which was given an extravagant dedication to Henry VIII. Henry could see that an English Bible would be an asset to the English reformation (which was also helping with his wife-problem). But the real spiritual renewal came with the open discussion and questioning up and down the land, and with a new wave of writings and commentaries by a succession of English theologians and preachers.

Five hundred years further on, where are we? All sorts of Bibles are accessible to us, from the King James Version to the Street Bible, as well as text and Twitter renditions. Sometimes I think we know it too well. The words are comfortably familiar. The stories come round regularly in our cycle of readings. We read it respectfully and religiously (I use the word deliberately). But does it have the impact it did when Ezra

read it to the Israelites, or when the sixteenth-century English cobbler could read it himself for the first time? Would we save up for six years and then walk twenty-five miles barefoot over the Welsh mountains to get hold of a copy, as Mary Jones did in 1789? I only got properly back in touch with the Bible about forty years ago, when a friend suggested that I should read the Penguin commentary on Matthew's gospel. Suddenly there were explanations for all sorts of things that hadn't really made sense to the teenage me. I could begin to see how Jesus's words and actions linked back to the Old Testament and forward to the Epistles – and finally even gave a purpose to Paul's missionary journeys.

Perhaps it's time to refresh your relationship with the Bible. Maybe it would be a good project for Advent. Remember Ezra's words: it is 'the wisdom of your God, in your hands'. How you do this depends entirely on you! Read a completely different version. Read it as a continuous text (there are versions set out like an ordinary book – not in verses). Read it out loud. Read it with a friend and discuss it as you go. Read some of the parts we rarely get to in church. Read the Apocrypha. Take one short section and read it every day for a week, or a month, and wait for it to speak to you. Read it with a commentary to explain more about it. It has inspired great deeds, great sacrifice and great saintliness. People have been imprisoned, tortured and died for it. And as we welcome Homer to baptism and full membership of our Christian family, we hope that he too will hold the wisdom of God in his hands, and find words to inspire, to comfort, to challenge and to treasure. As we say each Sunday: This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.