

Our second reading today is the second half of the last chapter of the book of Revelation; the very last verses of the Bible. It reads splendidly – a resounding conclusion to the New Testament. Everything is resolved, all the terrors and problems of the last days have been overcome, and heaven awaits. You would need to know the chapter very well to realise that three verses have been left out. Verse 15, is a list of the people who will be left outside the heavenly city: dogs, sorcerers, fornicators, murderers, idolators, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood – so perhaps everything is not completely sweetness and light after all. The other two verses, 18 and 19, are a warning to anyone who manipulates the prophecy: if someone adds to it, God will afflict them with plagues; if they take away from it, they will be cut off from their share in the heavenly city. It does seem a splendid irony that these two verses have been deliberately omitted from the reading!

It isn't often that I preach quite deliberately about something which isn't there! But this does, perhaps, make one wonder about what parts of the Bible we read, and what we don't read. Anyone who constructs lectionaries or prescribes readings for other people must treat the Bible with great care. Anyone who interprets the scriptures for others must be equally careful – preaching is a hazardous activity. Even when reading for oneself, one must not simply stick to the parts which are comforting, inspiring or helpful. All the rest needs serious attention as well.

Given that the Bible is a collection of writings which are between 3,500 and 2,000 years old, and that some parts of it were almost 1,500 years old before the New Testament writers began their work, honest reading and interpretation is difficult. The books were written by a variety of people for a variety of reasons: first to record history and tradition, to record law, to preserve sayings and poetry, and then to record and disseminate the activities and sayings of Jesus and his first followers. Some people maintain that the words of the Bible were directly dictated by God. This is probably not entirely true. Many others believe that the different writings in the Bible were inspired by God – which is true. No matter at what point in time, under what circumstances and from what viewpoint any part of the Bible was written, the reason was the same: the author wanted to record some aspect of the relationship between God and his people. Which is why we need to take the warning in Revelations 22, verses 18 and 19 very seriously. In dealing with the Bible, we need to include, understand and interpret all of what has been written – not just the pieces we like or which suit our purpose at a particular moment.

For more than 2,500 years, people have used the psalms as an integral part of worship. The church cycle of daily morning and evening prayer ensures that at least two psalms are read each day, so that the entire 150 are worked through several times a year. The psalms cover every aspect of life, from worship, joy and adoration to terror, abandonment and despair. But comparatively recently some have become optional or are omitted altogether – the ones commonly known as the “cursing” psalms, in which the writer calls on God to take revenge, to hurt or kill his enemies. These are now thought not to be suitable for worship – as if nice Christians somehow never experienced rage or fury or murderous thoughts. If we ignore this, we are overlooking an inescapable part of human nature, which needs acknowledgement and understanding just as much as our more socially-acceptable emotions.

It's easy to select parts of the Old Testament books of the law, or parts of the Epistles, or even parts of Jesus' sayings, to establish or defend a particular position. This can be

dangerous – by being selective are we twisting the meaning to suit our own purposes? Are we imputing to the words an interpretation that they were never intended to bear? We must remember that much Old Testament law was to regulate the behaviour of a nomadic and then agrarian tribe under immediate threat from local enemies. St. Paul was spreading the gospel in countries dominated by Graeco-Roman culture and patterns of thought which differ significantly from ours. The message of Jesus and the gospel writers was of a new covenant with God, based on a radical reinterpretation of the writings of the Old Testament, which now had to be read in a completely new light. Any competent speaker or writer will tailor their words and mode of delivery to their expected audience. If I were making these points to a class of teenagers, or writing an article for a theological journal, I would do it differently. If I were delivering the message at Speakers' Corner it would be different again – in fact I might well decide that Speakers' Corner was not the right location for this message at all. Unless I understand quite a lot about how and why a particular piece of the Bible says what it does in the way that it does, I risk getting the wrong end of the stick.

Reading the Bible is difficult. Speaking and writing about it, and about what it says to our world about what God is doing and how we are to recognise, approach and relate to him, is even harder. It needs careful thought and prayer in order to discern the message. We have no right to distort it, only a duty to try to let it speak for itself by illuminating its context. So, for example, we cannot ignore the statement in the other verse omitted from today's section of Revelation that unregenerate wrongdoers won't be admitted to the heavenly city. But we can put it into context – a context also given by the writer of Revelation and heard in today's gospel. That context is love: the love of God for humanity and for his Son, and the love of Jesus for all of us. That love is the guarantee that it is never too late to start again, to accept God's love and his mercy, and to begin to try to show it, however imperfectly, to one another. Every time we read the Bible; every time we try to explain it, to teach and preach the gospel, we must see it as an attempt to understand and demonstrate something of God's love for all his people, adding nothing in and leaving nothing out.