

**A sermon preached at St Andrew's Church Soham on the 4th Sunday after Trinity 2019
by the Revd Eleanor Whalley, Vicar. Deuteronomy 30: 9-14; Luke 10: 25-37**

In the written word, and through the spoken word, may we all encounter Christ, the Living Word. Amen.

Words, this week, have hit the headlines.

Yesterday's *Times* gives a post-mortem of the furore surrounding Sir Kim Darroch.

A case of private words being made public;

the effect of those words on UK-US relations;

the effect on Sir Kim's career as a diplomat.

The *Church Times* reports

on words spoken at last week's General Synod.

In his presidential address,

the Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu

drew attention to the power of words.

Lamenting the slow progress

the Church of England has made in recent years

in resolving its internal disagreements -

disagreements over issues such as human sexuality –

the Archbishop of York suggested

that one way for Anglicans to find some common ground

would be to sit down together

and read the Scriptures - together:

to listen to one another's reading of the same passage of Scripture;

to discern, through that listening, the movement of the Spirit;

to develop an attitude of openness and respect.

'To put yourself in your opponent's shoes, you need to believe God is leading your opponent, too, on the pilgrimage of faith seeking understanding.' As Christians read all of scripture deeply, the Holy Spirit [will] converge minds and wills together (Church Times, 12 July 2019 p. 14).

Before he said that,

the Archbishop warned

that members of the Church of England today,

whether they be clergy or laity,

have lost the sense

of the importance of reading the Bible:

'If we do not read consistently, we shall not think consistently,' he said (*ibid.*).

If we think back to today's first reading,

the Book of Deuteronomy,

like all the Torah – the books of the Law -

the first five books of what Christians call the Old Testament –

the book of Deuteronomy sees God's word

as the word that brings life.

Keep God's word –

keep God's commandments –

and you will find life.

Jesus reiterates that in today's Gospel.

A lawyer asks, 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?'

Jesus answers, 'What is written in the law?'

The law – the law at its heart –

the words dictated to Moses and set down in the book of Deuteronomy -

the law is the way to life.

The law is the instruction manual for turning the mind and the heart to God.

And Jesus, of course, sums up the law: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all you heart, and with all your mind, and with all your strength; and you shall love your neighbour as yourself'

According to Dr Sentamu – and I'm sure he's right –

we in the Church of England are missing a trick.

We're forgetting to read the Bible seriously.

We're cutting ourselves off from the word of life.

That's not true, I'm pleased to say, in the primary schools in Soham.

In our local primary schools,

thanks to the assemblies Colin Watkins, Colin Stringer, Delia and I are invited to lead in our schools,

enthusiasm for the Bible - and the teaching of the Bible -

is alive and kicking.

At last year's Christmas market,
two mums of 6-year-old boys
told me as their children were ascending and descending the steps of this pulpit and we were standing down there,
that both their 6-year-old sons had asked for Bibles for Christmas.

In February, Grace who is eight and in the brownies
(another Grace – not our Grace)
this Grace brought her new Bible to the Thinking Day service here in church.
She wanted to show it to me.
She'd had that Bible at the top of the list of presents she was hoping for for her birthday.
Here mum told me it was the only present Grace was interested in receiving.
Grace said to me, 'I read it every night – but I'm still on Genesis'.

I take this Bible into schools every time I lead an assembly
I don't read from it,
but I put it on show – I put it centre stage –
and I invite the children to act out a story,
and I make clear the story is from the Bible.
The children volunteer for parts, and I feed them their lines, so no one has to worry about reading anything.

Before we start I show them where in the Bible the story comes –
whether it's from near the beginning, or closer to the end.
I tell them roughly how long ago the story was written.
We think about whether it's a story Jesus would've heard when he was a little boy,
or whether it's one he'd've read in the synagogue.
I want the children to understand that the Bible is a compilation of texts,
Texts written by very different people,
and spanning very different eras.
I think they're beginning to get that.

At The Weatheralls and The Shade,
we're given a theme to work with.
For forgiveness,
I told them the story of Peter –

We acted out Peter's denial,
and his reinstatement on the beach after breakfast.
Also for forgiveness, we did the story of Joseph –
Joseph forgiving his brothers,
despite everything he'd been through because of them.

At St Andrew's we had a whole half term to devote to the story of Joseph;
at The Weatheralls with the KS2s, we had 20 minutes.

A very cool Year 6 girl volunteered to be Joseph.
She came to the front looking like she wished she'd never put her hand up.
She started off looking at her toes, but after about 60 seconds
she was completely taken up by the story.
She completely forgot herself.

You could've heard a pin drop in the hall.

For perseverance, which is one of The Weatherall's School values, we did the story of Elijah.

The KS1s had great fun creating the sound effects.

For the earthquake, they stamped their feet; for the wind, they blew; for the fire they clicked their fingers –
and finally the still small voice.

We also did the story of Jonah,
and with the wonderful predictability of primary-school-aged children,
everyone laughed when the whale threw up on the beach.

At St Andrew's School,
the assembly co-ordinator, is a committed Christian:

Sarah Churchill.

Jamie and I meet with her together from time to time.

Sarah issues assembly plans at the start of every half term.

The plans dictate what chapters – and even what verse - I'm to teach week by week.

We start at Genesis chapter 1 verse 1 in September,

and in July we arrive at the end of Revelation.

It's a triumph of organisation and teamwork,
and the children love it.

I met a little boy out on his bike

just before the schools went back in January.

'What story are we doing in assembly?' he asked me.

I have to confess I'd not yet looked at the plan – I usually look at the plan on a Wednesday morning - so I said

'I'm not sure, but it'll be a story about Jesus'.

The little boy went 'YES!!'

Claire Rutter, Christopher and Linda's daughter, emailed me last autumn

telling me she and Mark had been on a walk with Jamie.

Jamie's 11, he was 10 then.

Jamie had found a stick,

and he hit a puddle with the stick:

he shouted 'Look mum! I'm being Moses!'

Something is going in.

I like to think Dr Sentamu might be encouraged.

So this is Deuteronomy in practice:

'the word is very near you - it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe'.

Whoever we are – clergy or laity, young or old -

and amidst the many, many words of this world,

we need, I think, to wake up to God's word -

God's word that brings life.

We need to wake up to it

and read it.

Co-incidentally, Sue Woollard came to our Guide Dogs event here yesterday and gave me some 'Daily Bread' Bible reading notes. They're out of date, but as I said to the children at The Weatherall's last week, the Bible is never out of date. The Bible tells us what human beings are like, and what God is like – and that never changes.

There's a page for each day with two suggested Bible readings and a thought. If you'd like to take one as you leave, please do – Sue doesn't want them back. And you can buy up to date copies from Soham Books.

Amen.