

REFLECTION FOR THE THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

(06.09.2020)

With reference to Romans 13: 8-14 & Matthew 18: 15-20

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I have a confession to make. On Monday, as a family, we went into central London for the first time in six months. That's not the confession - we're allowed to do that, at the moment anyway. My confession is that, as we approached Parliament Square, we saw a man standing stock still in front of the statue of Sir Winston Churchill, holding a placard. As we and others crossed the road the man became animated. He shouted messages of judgement before telling us that we needed to read our Bibles. And - here's my confession - I retorted, 'And you need to read yours better.'

Now, it's highly unlikely that the man in question heard me but those nearer to me will have done and the rest of the Timmis family certainly did. Whilst I stand by the statement, I shouldn't have uttered it. What I said was born out of irritation and frustration but on some level, I suspect, it was designed to belittle another human being, whilst elevating myself above him at the same time. And I'm sorry that I did that.

How we approach and make use of scripture is though hugely important. We need to acknowledge how we are reading it and we need to understand what we're doing when we quote the Bible or use it to support our arguments.

I'm reading a fabulous little book at the moment. It's called *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again* - and it was written by Rachel Held Evans who inconceivably died suddenly last year following a short, flu-related illness, aged just 37. *Inspired* was her fourth and most recent book.

I'd like to read you a section that I found so powerful that I can't even begin to put into words how it made me feel when I first read it. Suffice to say, perhaps, that in just a few short paragraphs, Rachel articulates far better than I ever could, something that I believe and have been trying to say in sermons for the best part for twenty years - and in so doing she clarifies for me what that actually is.

"The truth is, you can bend Scripture to say just about anything you want it to say. You can bend it until it breaks. For those who count the Bible as sacred, interpretation is not a matter of *whether* to pick and choose, but *how* to pick and choose. We're all selective. We all wrestle with how to interpret and apply the Bible to our lives. We all go to the text looking for something, and we all have a tendency to find it. So the question we have to ask ourselves is this: are we reading with the prejudice of love, with Christ as our model, or are we reading with the prejudices of judgement and power, self-interest and greed? Are we seeking to enslave or liberate, burden or set free?

If you are looking for Bible verses with which to support slavery, you will find them. If you are looking for verses with which to abolish slavery, you will find them. If you are looking for verses with which to oppress women, you will find them. If you are looking for verses with which to honor [sic] and celebrate women, you will find them. If you are looking for reasons to wage war, there are plenty. If you are looking for reasons to promote peace, there are plenty more. If you are looking for an outdated and irrelevant ancient text, that's exactly what you will see. If you are looking for truth, that's exactly what you will find.

This is why there are times when the most instructive question to bring to the text is not, *What does this say?* but, *What am I looking for?* I suspect Jesus knew this when he said, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7).

If you want to do violence in this world, you will always find the weapons. If you want to heal, you will always find the balm. With Scripture, we've been entrusted with some of the most powerful stories ever told. How we harness that power, whether for good or evil, oppression or liberation, changes everything."

(from *Inspired* by Rachel Held Evans [Nelson Books, 2018] pp56-7)

Our readings this week offer us two short passages each of which, in its own way, has traditionally been understood to contain a particular message or address a specific subject. The Romans text has frequently been turned to in order to speak of the end times, of Jesus' return, of the need for Jesus' followers to prepare themselves for such a moment. The Matthew passage has oft been cited in conversations concerning the exercise of church governance and discipline.

To my mind, these passages illustrate that what Rachel Held Evans writes is surely correct. If we want to find fearful, judgemental messages in these readings, we will surely be able to do so. But if we read 'with the prejudice of love, with Christ as our model' then they can be read quite differently.

Because of my own beliefs and prejudices - which I need to be aware of and transparent about - I'm never going to approach this passage from Romans seeking answers about the end times. Questions can rage on about whether what Jesus said about his return and what his followers heard were one and the same thing or whether he meant something else and they misunderstood him. I suspect it's the latter but, in truth, the subject doesn't really interest me. Similarly, though church governance is an essential aspect of my role, it doesn't mean that I have to like it or enjoy it.

Yet, even for those like me who aren't necessarily drawn to such issues or matters, these readings still offer vital and urgent messages if we approach them with that guiding principle that we read scripture with the 'prejudice of love'.

Paul is adamant that absolutely everything that we do should be underpinned with love. In a sense then, it doesn't matter what Jesus meant when he spoke of his return, or how his followers interpreted his words. And we don't have to read Paul's words as a list of 'dos and don'ts' that we might continually check ourselves against to see whether we're being good disciples or not (no debauchery today, good, tick; a little bit of quarrelling, oh dear, cross). What Paul highlights is a universal truth: for each of us time is limited and precious so we should use that time wisely and live our lives well, not primarily thinking of our own wants or desires but of the needs and wellbeing of everyone.

Similarly, Jesus' message in Matthew is also surely one that's underpinned with love. This is a plea to his followers not to call out, expose or humiliate someone in front of others but instead to be gentle and kind to one another. Something I failed to remember in London last week - which brings me full circle. So perhaps my reflection for the week is that, going back to Rachel's suggestion that sometimes the most instructive question to bring to the Bible is not, *What does this say?* but, *What am I looking for?* we can sometimes tease that last question out a little more by also asking, *What do I most need to find?*