

Brancepeth Sermon: Bible Sunday

24 October 2021

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Isaiah 55:1-11; John 5: 36b-47; Psalm 19:7-14

*Let the words of my mouth
and the meditation of all our hearts
be acceptable to you,
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.*

Today is Bible Sunday
and according to the Bible Society
'Bible Sunday is about celebrating the Scriptures.'

So this morning, I want to ask *why*.

Why celebrate the scriptures?

What is good about them?

What are they *for*?

And for me, those are not artificial questions –

I'm not just posing them to give a shape to this sermon.

They are *real* questions.

They are *my* questions.

Because I don't always
find the Bible an easy book to live with.

There is lots in it that I find it hard to understand -
and it's hard to celebrate what you just don't *get*.

And there is also a lot in it that is disturbing and distressing:
stories of rape, of murder, of enslavement,
of ethnic cleansing, of genocide.

And there is a lot that has been used in
profoundly damaging ways down the centuries
- and still is used harmfully today.

When I think about *those* texts,
and the legacies that they have had,
I must admit to feeling more than a little ambivalent
preaching on a day dedicated to celebrating the Scriptures.

Nevertheless.

To understand why we might still want to celebrate,
I'm going to look at the passage we heard from Isaiah.
You might want to have it in front of you,
because I'm going to look at it in some detail.

I'm going to start at the end,
where Isaiah talks about God's word.
Now, Isaiah was not talking about the Bible -
The Bible in our sense didn't exist, back when Isaiah wrote -
but I think we can take what he says
and use it to help us *think about* the Bible.

So, look at the end of the passage, at verse 11.
At this point, God is speaking - and speaking about
'my word ... that goes out from my mouth.'
This word, God says, 'shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.'

'It shall accomplish that which I purpose.'

What sort of picture does this conjure up?

Well, it might conjure up a sort of celestial Star Trek captain -
a heavenly Jean-Luc Picard
sitting on his captain's chair and saying
'Make it so!'

(And apologies both to those for whom this reference means nothing,
and to partisans of the *original* Star Trek series.)

Is that the kind of picture this verse is meant to paint?

What God says, *goes*.

When God issues a command,

what God commands *happens*.

God's word is effective; it achieves God's purposes.

Well ... yes, I guess.

But I don't think that's what this passage is really on about.

To see why, let's go back a step, to verse 10.

'For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth.'

Rain watering the earth.

That's a really odd image to choose
if what you're trying to say is
that God is a decisive and impressive commander,
a divine star fleet captain.

Rain watering the earth.

Why choose that image?

Well, have a think about where, in the Bible,
we first encounter God speaking -
where we first encounter God's word.

It's right at the start:

'And God said, "Let there be light!"

And just a little bit later, we hear God speak again:

"Let the earth put forth vegetation:

plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth
that bear fruit with the seed in it." *And it was so.*'

Yes, there is some kind of 'make it so' thing happening there,
but there's something more than that -
something *much* more than that.

God's word brings life.

That's its first characteristic, its signature.

Where there is darkness and chaos, it brings light.

Where there is lifeless soil, it brings fruitfulness.

Where there are dried twigs, it brings buds.

Where there are dry bones, it knits them back together
and wraps them in flesh.

And when God in Genesis creates all that vegetation

he doesn't simply command it all into existence

he speaks to the dry earth

so that *the earth* becomes fruitful

so that grass and flowers and trees spring up from it

and grow towards the sound of God's voice.

God's word, you might say, *waters the parched earth.*

That is why Isaiah says, back at verse 3

‘Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.’

God’s word speaks to revive, to enliven, to animate, *to resurrect*.

That is what it is for.

That is what God purposes for it to accomplish -
and God’s life-giving word will not return to God empty.

But we can dig a bit further still,

if we look at verses 8 and 9:

“My thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways,” says the Lord.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.’

We could be back in Jean-Luc Picard territory here.

The captain says jump, and you jump -
you don’t ask ‘Why?’

God seems to be saying:

‘Don’t assume you have the right or the capacity
to question, to understand -
just *obey!*’

And again, I want to say,
well, maybe there's *something* of that here -
but I really don't think it's the main point.

To see why, we need to look back at verse 3.

There, God says,
'I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.'

This talk of a covenant, a covenant with David
would have reminded Isaiah's readership that
God *has* already made a covenant, a treaty, a *deal*
with them - the people of Israel, David's people.

And Isaiah can expect his readers to know
that, as with any covenant, any deal,
both sides in this arrangement had obligations.

God made promises to bless Israel -
but the people of Israel, Isaiah's audience,
they also made promises to *obey*.

That was their side of the deal.

And Isaiah is writing a long, long time
after that covenant was established.

He is all too aware that the people of Israel made promises
that they did not keep (any more than we do).

So that the covenant mentioned in verse 3 - well, it's a bust.

And at the time when Isaiah was writing,
that is a very obvious fact.

The people of Israel are in exile.

They are out of the promised land.

The line of David's kings has failed.

They blew it, and it is all over.

But then, in verse 7, Isaiah says to this exiled, orphaned people,

'Seek the Lord while he may be found,

call upon him while he is *near*;

let the wicked forsake their way,

and the unrighteous their thoughts;

let them return to the Lord, *that he may have mercy on them,*

and to our God, for *he will abundantly pardon.*'

The story of the covenant is *not*, in fact over.

It should be over.

By rights it *is* over.

The deal got broken,

it got shattered, in fact.

The penalty clauses have come into play

and there has been hell to pay.

And that should be the end of the story.

Exile is *obviously* the end of the story.

It is *meant to be* the end of the story.

But God refuses to let the story end.
God doesn't stick to the terms that Israel accepted,
the terms they could understand.
Instead, God waits ready for them
ready to welcome them back,
ready to restore them to life,
ready to shine upon them like a new dawn
the moment they turn their heads.

And *that* is what is going on when God says
'my ways are higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.'

God's word here is not saying what Israel expects,
what Israel has *every right* to expect;
God's word here blows apart
the expectation, the understanding,
that Israel has so carefully nurtured.

Beyond everything deserved,
beyond the terms of every deal,
beyond every consequence,
beyond every drying up and falling away,
beyond every failure,
beyond every limit and frustration,
beyond every death,
God's word still speaks life.

Because God's word, fundamentally, is a *promise*.

It is God's promise *not* to let go,

God's promise *never* to let go,

God's promise to be there,

God's promise to be with us, whatever, wherever, whenever.

It is God's promise to be *inexhaustible*

to persist with us, whatever comes:

God's word is God's promise.

Listen carefully to this word, God says in verse 2,

'and eat what is good,

delight yourselves in *rich food*.'

This is sustenance;

this is what we need;

this is our daily bread –

this promise:

God's promise of God's inexhaustible self.

And *that* is what scripture is for.

Above and beyond any other purpose, any other meaning

that is what scripture is for:

to convey to us this life-giving promise.

That's the golden thread that stitches it together.

That's the theme tune.

That's the guiderail that I hold on to

when I'm reading passages I don't understand
or don't know how to handle.

The secret at the centre of scripture is *promise*.

And that's why, finally, in the light of our gospel passage
we can also say that the purpose of the scriptures -

the *deep* purpose,

the *central* purpose -

is to testify to Jesus,

to show us *Jesus* as God promising to be with us

no matter what:

God with us undefeatable by death;

God with us

 beyond any failure and abandonment on our part;

God with us in whatever plight we face;

God with us in whatever shadows,

whatever dryness,

whatever lifelessness we endure -

Scripture testifies to Jesus

as God's inexhaustible promise, made flesh.

And, yes, that that is worth celebrating.

Blessed Lord,
who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning;
help us so to hear them,
to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them
that, through patience, and the comfort of your holy word,
we may embrace and for ever hold fast the
hope of everlasting life,
which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ,
who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy
Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen