

Mark 8:31-38

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

The Bible

So we left last week with the stunning realisation that, although we may not be able to define a Christian exactly by what they do or what they believe, we can say that all Christians believe in One God, the creator, the father almighty. We've got to the first line of the creed!!

But we're still not saying much are we. Rowan Williams always says - the question is not whether people believe in God, the question is - what does your God look like, and how do you know? Because although we can see the hand of God in all of nature and creation, and St Paul says that "God has not left himself without witness" the fact remains that most of what we know about God, we get from the stories in the Bible. That is not history, its HIS Story. The story of the relationship between God and his creatures.

Ours is a religion of revelation. Ours is a story of a God reaching out to be known by the people he has made.

You see many faiths are about a system - buddhism - if you practice this, you will get progress through the stages of enlightenment It doesn't matter what you belief, just follow this system.

Some faiths are about striving to know God - use these crystals, or follow this guru, open your inner eye, and if you try hard enough, work at it, you might attain knowledge of the holy.

But Christianity is the other way. Its all about God wanting to hang out with us, and us being the ones too scared (in the garden of Eden), too proud (at the tower of Babel), too rebellious (at the flood) - and so he is constantly chasing us. Trying to show us what he is like. And us not wanting to have him around.

And of course, the greatest revelation of what this God is like, is Jesus - when God came himself. And no, many people did not want him around either - but we'll get to that in a couple of weeks.

But did you ever consider that 99% of what we know about Jesus - what he said, what he did, where he lived, what he ate, how he treated others, what he stood for - all of it - its only in one place - in this slim volume of 4 gospels, plus a chapter of Acts.

So most of what we know about God, and nearly everything we know about Jesus - who is the best glimpse we've ever had of God - is in the Bible.

There are some other texts - the Didache - which means teacher, and lots of books by people interpreting the Bible - St Augustine, Irenaeus, Oremus - they've all got us at the end! And after the fall of the Roman Empire, writing and reading go out of fashion for a bit. The Celts - good old St Patrick in the 6th Century, and the blessed Vikings who caught God in a big way after destroying Holy Isle and such places - but then the writing starts again - Julian of Norwich, Thomas Aquinas in the middle ages, and then an explosion with the printing press and the reformation and the printing press. And so many books about God and Jesus written in the last few decades. If you speak to publishers - God publishing is a boom market - people are always wanting to know about God and spiritual stuff, and when they catch it, they buy buy buy! And some of these books are amazing - and have helped me and millions others - but... their knowledge of Jesus on earth.. is all second hand. You'll only find that in the 4 gospels and 1 chapter of the book of Acts.

So its so important. So here's this week's mark of being a Christian.

Christians **should** study, not read, the Bible.

Of course you can be a Christian and never read the Bible. For most of the time since Jesus most people couldn't read and didn't have the Bible in their own language when they could. So they had been told about Jesus by someone else, and they might have had art that told some of the stories. But having the bible - no way!

And Its so recent to have one book, in our language, that's easily available - think how difficult it was even in the 1500's with monks copying it out by hand!

And there are still languages that only have a fraction of the Bible translated. In fact there's not a version of the whole new testament even in Sign language! So we're pretty lucky to have it in several types of English - the old Shakespeare English, the posh English, and the slang hip English - plus all the other types.

But have you ever wondered why, if its so important for faith and knowing about God, we its not in the creed. We believe in God, his Son Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit. But no mention of the Bible! But that's exactly it. The creeds were written before the Bible was assembled and put together! To believe in God was what was important, not whether you'd read the 2nd letter of Peter.

Nowadays - when we all have a bible on our shelves - some churches and organisations do have statements saying "they believe in the Bible" - but as we've seen on a Wednesday night - its not about whether you believe in it, its all a matter of interpretation. And that seems really important. You see if the Bible is this key book - the only source of stuff about God and Jesus - then how we handle it, how we read it, is really important.

Some times people say the bible is like a map - and it leads us to God.

Yes, and you had to learn to read a map, didn't you - at first it was all colours and lines and odd letters - PH? What does that mean? So we have to learn how to read the bible.

Some people say the bible is like a rule book or a guide book for life. How God wants us to live. But that makes it sound much easier than it is.

Yes it is full of rules and guidance - but laws and rules are being interpreted all the time - that what we have lawyer and courts and judges for! And the whole legislature who write reims and reims about how to interpret the laws. Which is just what was happening in Jesus day - with the scribes and pharisees!

So we're in this dilemma.

We've got this really important book - the only source of so much knowledge about this God who wants to make themselves known to us..

Yet - its not easy. What if I get it wrong? I might get the wrong idea of God, I might tell others the wrong idea - we might miss out on good things now, or not be following God - help! Ostrich!

So some people stop reading it - its too hard.

Or they find teachers who've made it seem really easy.

When I was researching for this Lent series on "what makes a Christian" I found some that told me all about Jesus, the cross, the resurrection, and the holy spirit, but made no mention of the fact that we know about these things from the Bible!

On the other hand there's the Alpha course. Its obviously a brilliant course, and helped literally millions of people find Jesus as s their friend and saviour. But.. week 1, if you've done it - is all about the Bible - and it says the Bible is important, and here's the historical evidence for it.. but it omits to say that the Bible is 66 different books and they're not all the same stuff!!

And I want to say - I'd rather you didn't read it, than you followed people who made it simple.

But I'd encourage you to read it, and have a go.

Like map reading - there are some keys and codes you can pick up quite simply.

Asking what genre a book is - is this trying to tell me history or is it a prophet warning about something? Is this a poem, or a register list?

And like the law - you might need expert help in interpreting it - so don't be afraid to go to a commentary - or more than one. Ask other Christians - how do you read this. Best of all - do it as a group - in a house group, and be part of a church - because churches have been interpreting and handling this important and dangerous book for hundreds of years. We haven't always done it safely or well - sorry about slavery, sorry about catholics vs protestants - but we do keep working on interpreting it.

Because that's the thing - I've been reading and studying this book all my life, I've got O levels, and years of experience, and a degree from Cambridge - and I'm still learning new stuff about God every week when I read it. New angles, new approaches, things that speak differently to me in this situation or that context. Sometimes I'm confused, sometimes I change my mind. But this is the jewel we have - and I can keep on exploring it, and I'll never get to the end of it.

Let me finish with my tips on ways to read the bible...

Always pray beforehand. The holy spirit inspired those who wrote this, so ask the holy spirit to help you.

Decide what you're going to use the Bible for today.

So what I mean is -

Are you coming to meet God in these stories? Are you coming to soak yourself in the stories about how God relates to us, or what Jesus was like?

I think of that as like soaking in a bath of God stuff, or sucking a boiled sweet.

Its like devotional. You're laying aside your questions about who wrote it and why, and just immersing yourself in the world in the pages.

Or

Are you coming to understand what happened and why. The timeline, history stuff, who's who.

Which involves a lot more questions - Why did people find this important to write down? Who would have read it and what would they have made of it. How does it fit with other events or ideas about God or the land? Or in other cultures at the time?

Because those two approaches are very different. And both are really valuable and important. But they're not the same.

So...

Christians believe in one God - the creator, like a father, who loves us.

A god who is trying to make themselves known

And one way is through the pages of the bible.

When you read a good story, like Dickens or Graham Greene, or JK Rowling - you get drawn in to their world, you relate to the characters - Well here is a book which allows us to glimpse into God's mind and working. It is a means of relationship with him.

If you haven't read the bible for a while - take it down and discover an old friend.

If you have read it - why not open it somewhere unexpected, unusual - Jeremiah, Peter or John - and see what treasures you might find.

Karl Barth was probably the 20th Centuries greatest theologian and he wrote a book all about the prodigal son and how this was the overarching story of the whole bible - Jesus leaving the fatehr, going in to the pigs, coming home. Well Barth didn't finish it before he died - he wrote 6 million words (that's 8 times as long as the entire Harry Potter series), but when asked to sum up his book and his faith he simply said

Jesus loves me, this I know

For the Bible tells me so.

The best book to read is the bible.