

Bible Sunday

One could argue that every week is Bible Sunday. But this day is given to us especially to reflect more on what that means. What is the Bible? Henri Nouwen, the wonderful 20th century spiritual writer and teacher calls scripture 'bread for the journey' so it's not surprising that we read in our Collect, that we heard earlier this morning:

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...'

It's a wonderfully resonant image that invites us to think as scripture as food. This is not a new idea. Medieval spirituality is full of images in which contemplating scripture is thought of as nourishment. So there are images of bees buzzing around from flower to flower gathering pollen, and images of breastfeeding, which is a resonant and glorious image of experience of feeding on the word of God. And earlier in Paul's letter to Timothy, we hear that Timothy's mum and grandma were the ones who raised him in the faith, and who ensured that he grew up immersed in the word of God. We might also think of the prophet Ezekiel, who was commanded to eat a scroll, in order to be equipped to take God's word to God's people, for it to become so much part of him that he could speak it out to God's people.

And then when Jesus refuted the devil during his temptations in the wilderness, he drew on scripture going back as far as the book of Deuteronomy: 'one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord'.

Scripture as food is not a new idea at all.

But scripture as food is not just about nourishment. We are commended in the Isaiah reading we heard earlier, to think of food as something in which we might delight, and I love the idea that we might also delight in the food of scripture, delighting ourselves in the rich food; and the bible gives us an incredible array of riches: beautiful, challenging, glorious, difficult riches.

Nigella Lawson revolutionised the recipe book world when she wrote her book *How to eat*, turning on its head the idea that recipe books should be all about the technical process of making food, and instead encouraging people to focus on the experience of eating. The title of that book, in turn, inspired the title of this brilliant book by Miranda Threlfall Holmes, which I really recommend. She called it 'How to eat bread' and it is 'twenty one nourishing ways to read the Bible'. It is a book not about study of the Bible, but about how we consume the Bible. Genuinely it's a fantastic book, and a wonderful tool to help us inwardly digest scripture. And it's worth noting that (if I remember my GCSE biology correctly) chewing is the first stage of digestion, so chewing scripture is part of how we start to wrangle with its complexities, and enjoy its riches. Some parts of scripture are more chewy than others!

The food images of scripture that I've alluded to already are not passive, they are active, and they imply a prolonged, whole person engagement with scripture. Chewing thoroughly can make what at first seems bitter start to turn sweet, and if you read that passage from Ezekiel you will find that what at first tastes sweet might then start to disagree with us in all sorts of creative and challenging ways. There is a dwelling with the word of God that changes our relationship with it. We must chew our food because scripture is a complex food that keeps releasing new nutrients and new tastes to us.

The next thing that springs to mind for me is that when we chew over the word of God we can do that on our own but we are especially exhorted to do this together. Nourishment is for the communal body, the Church, the body of Christ (that's St Paul again) – you might imagine his letters to the early church as food parcels, in which he is giving those little embryonic churches the tools they need to dwell more deeply in the word of God that forms them.

And if scripture is bread for the journey, it's not a journey that we are required to take alone, but as part of a community. I've said this before, but it's worth saying again: the word 'companion' derives from 'with + bread', so the ones who are companions on the journey are the ones with whom we break bread, and with whom we break open God's word. That's partly why it's so crucial that we read scripture together when we gather for worship.

And if scripture is a meal, it may be that it's more of a bring and share meal. When we break open God's word together we experience so much more of its riches. Isaiah's expansive vision of hospitality, generosity and justice, suggests that we might do well to seek out diverse groups as we chew over scripture. It's worth bearing in mind particularly for those of us who preach, or lead bible studies, or who enter into any conversation really about the word of God, that *we all stand somewhere*, we all have a place from which we explore and expound scripture, and it's really good for us to intentionally put ourselves in spaces alongside those who have a different place to stand, actively seeking the perspectives of others. One of the ways that I do this is by this wonderful book, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, by Ernesto Cardenal. It's transcriptions of discussions about Gospel readings, from a tiny community of peasants and artists in revolutionary Nicaragua. I'm going to read to you briefly from the introduction, because for me this is a really important part of how we seek communities of difference in which to break open God's word.

'Every Sunday in Solentiname, a remote archipelago in lake Nicaragua, inhabited by **Campasinos**, which are peasants, instead of a sermon, we held a discussion on the gospel reading. These discussions were often more profound than those of many theologians, but they reflected the simplicity of the gospel readings themselves. That is not surprising; the good news was written for them, by people like them. Not everyone who came participated equally; some spoke more than others. Marcelino was a mystic, Olivia was more theological, Rebeca, Marcelino's wife, always talked about love. Lauriano saw everything in terms of the revolution. Elvis was always thinking about the perfect society of the future. Filipe, another youth, was constantly aware of the proletarian struggle. His father, old Thomas, couldn't read, but spoke out of deep wisdom. Alejandro, Olivia's son was a youth leader, but had guidance to offer everyone, especially other young people. Pancho was a conservative, but later took a different position. Julio Mariena was a staunch defender of equality; his brother Oscar always talked about unity. They, and all the others who often spoke up and had important things to say, and those who spoke little, but also said important things, are the authors of this book. '

It's an incredible moving set of bible commentaries, and I will leave the copy of the book around at coffee time if you want to have a flick through.

For me, it's been hugely formative of the way I approach scripture, making sure I am not just standing in the place where I stand, but to try and get that sense of the perspective of others.

This communal chewing over scripture can happen through reading resources like this, through talking to others, and it also happens over time. Jesus, talking in the gospel today, is reflecting on the reading of his own story, in the scriptural texts that he grew up with and which were forming the community he was speaking to. And we, too, learn from the long and diverse history of how the church has chewed over the bible. It is not so much like a cupboard full of identical tinned produce, but much more like a family recipe, passed down through the generations.

And notice, too, that when the readings keep coming back in the lectionary every three years, we may be struck by different things – because we have changed, and the world had changed, we find ourselves standing in a slightly different place.

Notice how in the letter of Paul to Timothy, Paul writes about scripture being 'God-breathed'. Although the Bible is a printed book, it can still be dynamic, living, active. So in that reading, when it talks about scripture being inspired, God-breathed, this is the same Spirit that hovered over the void at the moment of creation, that is making and remaking us every time we read scripture together; as Jesus promises us life when we come to know him, it is that same life, that same breath of God that we are being offered. So we should expect scripture to feel alive. We should expect it to surprise us and challenge us, as well as comfort us. Because it is given to us through that Spirit, that breath of God, and we hear it through that same live giving Spirit. When we read the Bible, God is present.

It is said that we are what we eat. That has been said too about the Eucharist, and about the experience of being formed as we consume God's word. It is not an accident that if you look at your order of service today you will see two of the big headings that cover between them most of the service, 'The Liturgy of the Word' and 'The Liturgy of the Sacrament' – these

are two sides of the same coin. The whole service is suffused with scripture, giving us a wonderful, rich, varied, balanced diet, not only in the readings but in all the bits of scripture scattered throughout the liturgy. When we receive communion we do so in the context of scripture, and of one another as the gathered body of Christ: the word of God in scripture and the word made flesh in Jesus Christ and the body of Christ, the Church.

So what? You might say.

The first thing is that I've recommended a couple of books already, and I'd like to recommend another one if you've suddenly become enthusiastic about the theology of food, please do talk to our very own David Grummet, who has written a most wonderful book about the theology of food.

Also I would say that just as my NHS weight loss app says 'don't throw yourself into a fad diet, but rather develop a relationship with food that will help you form habits that are sustainable and sustaining' (and it's easier if you're not doing it on your own), I know there are some lessons that I can apply for that to my relationship with scripture. The first is that we don't have to read scripture on our own (although we can). We can join a group, or find a buddy. There are some amazing groups here in Great St Mary's that offer companionship, and a supportive environment in which our care for one another and our being challenged by reading scripture go hand in hand. Do ask if you would like to know more about these groups and how to join one.

Intentionally start conversations with people who are standing in a different place from you. Read more than one translation of a bible reading and see what questions that brings up for you. Look at artistic interpretations and creative resources when you engage with scripture. How have people painted and sculpted this passage?

Chew your food! And don't worry if some passages are more chewy than others.

Aim for a balanced diet that includes at least some whole foods – we are always told to be careful about having too many ultra processed foods, and the same may be true of scripture. Don't be afraid to do some cooking from

scratch, and some experimenting, and reading creatively and courageously.

And as we approach scripture we can read scripture seasonally and out of season – notice how the same reading feels different in Advent from in Eastertide; how a reading feels different in the light of what's in the news, of world events.

But most of all whenever we open the bible to read or learn or converse, we do so with open hands, with open minds and open hearts, ready to forage, to reach out and grasp what God may be giving us. Open to its challenges and open to its gifts.

A Bible Sunday sermon is not one that ends, because it is always an invitation to keep chewing, to share with one another your recipes that you have had handed down to you, and to enjoy together and to delighted in the immense riches that the Bible contains as a gift to us, individually and as God's church.