

The word of God is living and active

Jeremiah 36
Romans 10 5 – 21
Beverley Minster Evensong
27.10.13 – Bible Sunday

I've been reflecting on the verse which says that the Word of God is 'living and active, sharper than a two edged sword'. Some preachers like me would set you a quiz after that, giving a prize for the person who could tell me the reference – it's Hebrews 4.12. But, though knowing where things are in the Bible is very useful indeed, I don't think that our response to Scripture is only about our knowledge of its details. That said, if you can tell me which King in the Bible had an iron bed 13 feet long and six feet wide I'll be impressed.

That very phrase 'the word of God' can be a bit of a problem. It's an easy phrase to apply to the collected books which make up the Christian Bible, and some people would make your attitude to the Bible – whether you believe it is the literal and never wrong Word of God – a test of the reality of your Christian faith. In Hebrews the context is not about Bible reading, it is about hearing the word of God, not least in the person of Jesus Christ. The phrase does not apply to this – the book – but to our understanding of, and carrying out of, what God says. Those things are recorded in the Bible. But the Word of God is not contained here. God's word to us is unleashed from here.

At my ordination the candidates were asked: 'Do you accept the Holy Scriptures as revealing all things necessary for eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ'? The answer: 'I do so accept them'. I was involved in the group which rewrote the Ordination service. It was suggested that this question might be reworked. We tried something like 'Do you accept the Bible as the Word of God?' and it soon became clear that this would not do. Hardly anywhere does the Bible refer to itself in these terms. The Word of God is used of Jesus Christ, and it is through belief in this Logos, through repentance, forgiveness, through faith in the one sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, through a living relationship with Jesus the Word of God, that we are reborn, made new, given hope, offered new life. The Scriptures point us to the Word. They contain all things necessary for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

And in our readings tonight the Word of God is seen to be alive and active. Jeremiah, and his secretary, Baruch, write God's words to the nation down. They have an effect! "When they heard all the word's they turned to one another in alarm..." *Jeremiah 36.16* They are so powerful that Baruch and Jeremiah have to hide. And when the King, as predicted, doesn't like what he hears, and burns the words, they simply get written down again, and more besides. The word of God will not lie down.

Paul, writing to the Romans, quotes the Hebrew scriptures, from Deuteronomy 30. 8 – "the word is near you, on your lips and in your heart." In some Christian traditions the person reading the Gospel at Communion goes for a blessing from the priest before the reading, and this phrase is used – "may the Lord be on your lips and in your heart, that you may worthily proclaim the Gospel." It's a reminder that it is not enough to have the Bible in our heads: the word of God is about what we say and feel and do – how we are, not what we know.

We learn the Bible by doing it, not just storing up the facts. This is about interpretation and application, about seeing how in our homes and work places and in our leisure time the

Bible's teaching cashes out. What then does it mean to love one another? You might even know that 'love' in the New Testament is *agape*: unconditional love. But can you, will you, love unconditionally the person who has just sung that hymn out of tune, who opposed you on the PCC last month? What about your neighbour who has the noisy dog? No amount of knowledge will do any good unless it is applied, and reflected on, and applied again. Similarly, Paul isn't writing a philosophical essay on the presence of God in words. He is pleading with the Roman church to let the Word of God be active in them – not just to know it, but to speak it. "How," he asks, "are the people to hear without someone to proclaim?" *Romans 10. 14*

It is amazing how many faithful Christians don't really know their Bibles. More than once I have been asked, just before a service, whether Isaiah is part of the Old or New Testament. Getting the mechanics right is essential I think. Knowing what period of history a particular reading is from also helps, or the context into which Paul was writing. All of this is to allow our salvation to be spoken to us, and to allow us to speak it to others. So, to quote Rachel Young this morning, 'read the Bible'. And if you come across Og, King of Bashan, and his big bed, in Deuteronomy 3.11, all the better.