**SUNDAY NEXT BEFORE LENT, 2018**

**THE GROSVENOR CHAPEL**

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**“This is my Son, the beloved, listen to him.”**

In the vestry before the service began, I was reminded of links between All Saints, Margaret Street and the Grosvenor Chapel. There are photographs of the great Bishop Charles Gore who lived at All Saints while ministering here in retirement. Then there was Fr. John Gaskell, who came to the Chapel after being a curate at All Saints. John Betjeman described him as one of the finest preachers in the Church of England. So, no presssure

One thing I have learned in over 40 years of celebrating the offices and the mass day by day, and before that hearing the scriptures read in school and church for most of my life, has been how often a reading throws up something unbidden that speaks to your situation.

Today is one of those occasions with those words of God the Father on the Mount of Transfiguration. They are addressed not just to those three disciples but to all followers of Jesus Christ and to us here at the Grosvenor Chapel this morning as we come to the Liturgy of the Word in your series on the Eucharist. I don't know if your clergy had spotted than when they allocated this subject to this Sunday or whether it is just a happy coincidence.

When I was preparing this sermon, I took down from the shelves in my study a collection of essays called **“The Art of Reading Scripture.”** On its cover is Rembrandt's painting of the Prophetess Anna – dressed as a prosperous looking 17th century Dutch bourgeois lady – she looks as if she would be quite at home in Mayfair. She is read a large bound copy of the Hebrew Scriptures. This is a classically Protestant picture - the individual believer poring searching the scriptures.

But before Scripture is read in private, it is heard in public. For most Christians throughout the ages and even in the world today, the norm is listening. Very few early or medieval Christians could have owned a Bible. Before we are people who read the Bible, Christians are people who hear it read to us. The Church is a community which listens to hear something; a community which exists in response to a word of summons.

That priority of hearing is found even in Archbishop Cranmer's Collect:

**“Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to HEAR them” ,...**before we “**read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them.”**

Even in a largely literate society like ours, our private reading of Scripture takes place and is understood against the background of this public reading.. The Church is in the language of Scriptures is an **“assembly”'**, a **“convocation”.**  Its basic character is seen when it listens to the act of convoking, calling together. The Eucharist represents the moment when all are guests, responding to an invitation addressed to us by God.

In listening to Scripture, the Church sees that it is not the creation of its members and their thoughts and ideals. What we hear is not just information about people long ago, or some improving thoughts which might support our own better intentions or aid our efforts at self-improvement. What we hear in Scripture is a summons to come together as a community that understands itself as called and created “out of nothing.” As Jesus says: **“You did not choose me, I chose you.”**

In the Church of England, we use a lectionary – that is a system of readings which have been chosen for us by the Church. Nowadays, it is a revised version of the three year cycle introduced by the Roman Catholic Church as part of the renewal of the liturgy after the Second Vatican Council. In it we read through one of the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke - in each of the three years. We hear John's Gospel on occasions through the year.

One advantage of a lectionary is that it should spare you too much of preachers' personal enthusiasms and hobby horses; their favourite bits of the Bible. But more importantly, over the years of the cycle we are exposed to be breadth and depth of the scriptures. It should make preachers work harder at studying them; how one book or passage relates to another; how sometimes they are engage in argument with each other; how the New Testament is often foreshadowed in the Old – and the Old fulfilled in the New; how we cannot understand Jesus without the Old Testament, and how the Old is fulfilled and understood in him. Remember how Jesus goes into the synagogue in his home town, opens the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and reads from it: **“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me , because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free., to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.” God has anointed me**

Then he rolls up the scroll and says to them: **“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”**

We read the Old Testament because its writings were the scriptures of Jesus and the early Church; before the Canon of the New Testament was formed. We read them, too, because we are the descendants of those people who were called by God before us: patriarchs and matriarchs, judgs and kings, prophets and priests, psalmists and sages.

We read the epistles and Acts and Revelation because they speak to us of the early Church's response to the revelation on God in the Christ, the Word made flesh, who shared our human life, who went about among us, who gave his life for us on the cross, who died and rose again, who opened the Scriptures to his disciples on the road to Emmaus and in the Upper Room; and who is present with us through the Holy Spirit in Word and Sacrament and fellowship.

In our liturgy we stand to hear the Gospel proclaimed, as if “to attention.” We often turn towards the Gospel Book which has been carried into the midst of the congregation, There are lights and the incense of prayer. When the gospel is announced we respond **“Glory to you, O Lord.”** At its conclusion: **“Praise to** you**, O Christ.”** We address Christ directly, as he addresses us in the reading of the Gospel. In listening to the Gospel, we listen to Jesus. In our tradition, we believe in the real presence of Christ in the Sacrament, but we also believe in his real presence in the word.

In my study, as I'm sure in Fr. Richard, there are shelves of commentaries on the scriptures; the tools of a preacher's trade. In them we find the fruit of the labours of scholars who have studied ancient languages and cultures, history and thought, to illuminate the background and meaning of what we read; the different types of writing and historical contexts.

Preachers need this work lest they succumb to the temptation of what those who taught me divinity in Edinburgh, waned us against: **eisegesis** – that is reading our own ideas into scripture – rather than **exegesis** – the opening up of what Scripture is saying.

But we do not listen to Scripture in a vacuum, in a private spiritual world.. We read and preach scripture in the here and now; amidst the politics and economics of the 21st century, as the biblical writers did in theirs. So preachers need to know something of the culture and politics and thought of their own day, as well as those of Moses or Jesus. As one of the theological giants of the last century said, the preacher must work with the bible at one hand and the newspaper at the other. If we need any persuasion that this is as necessary now as then, just think of the moral bankruptcy of an American evangelicalism which has sold its soul to a form of racist nationalism.

Scripture is not read primarily in the study, nor taught in the lecture room; it is read in Church, in the context of worship, as part of our living relationship, our communion, with God. Preaching is something which involves both preacher and audience. Here is Mayfair we are not likely to have the “Amen Corner” you find in Black American churches; that group of people who sit down at the front and encourage the preacher with “Amens' and “Hallelujahs,” but signs of visible attention and interest do encourage the preacher.

But let me return to that old Dutch lady and her bible. The Church of England probably reads more scripture in its public worship than any other Christian community: far more than many of those churches which would claim to be more “biblical” than us; more of the gospels than many of those who would claim the label “evangelical” as a mark of spiritual superiority.

But before we start preening ourselves, the questions we should be asking ourselves are perhaps these:

* Do we read the scriptures outside church?
* Are they part of our prayers and life for the whole of the week?
* Do we pray over them, reflect on them?

A few years ago a priest in the US came to the conclusion that most of his fellow-Episcopalians were pretty ignorant of Scripture and devised a scheme for people to read though the whole of the BIble in one year and to share in reflecting on their experience. It has caught on in many places.

There are resources with impeccable catholic credentials to help us in this:

The Anglican system of worship which sets our reading of scripture in the context of the Eucharist and the Daily Offices of Morning and Evening Prayer, has its roots in the practices of Benedictine monasticism. In that tradition, the communal reading of scripture is accompanied by personal reflection on it in what is called ***Lectio Divina –*** or sacred reading, a slow, deliberate, prayerful meditative mulling over of a passage, even a word, a rumination, a chewing of the cud, which yields depths of meaning. This is a form of prayer which has been rediscovered and practiced anew in recent decades.

The spirituality of your Jesuit neighbours at Farm Street is based on the Spiritual Exercises of their founder St. Ignatius of Loyola. He took and developed the systems of meditation on the gospels which had developed in the later Middle Ages, adapting them to his purpose of helping people find their vocation. This involved the imagination; picturing the scene and its characters and events; placing oneself in that scene; asking, “What is God is saying to me through it?,” What is God asking me to do through it?”

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