

Let's Read the Bible!

Sermon for Bible Sunday.

Reading: John 5: 39-47

Those of you who've been on an Alpha Course or come to a Film Group evening at our house will know that technical things are not my strength! Like most men, I don't like reading the instructions, but I don't even try to operate the DVD recorder and player; I just leave it to Kathy. I now have my little Noddy guide on a scrap of paper telling me how to put a DVD on. But occasionally it still won't work, and one evening this summer when Kathy was out and we were wanting to watch one of the Alpha DVDs, we had a group attempt to get it going, and of course it was a woman who persuaded it to work! We do have the instructions, in a box on top of a cupboard, but of course we didn't get those out. It would have taken too long and been a hassle, so we just bashed on and got it going by trial and error.

I think this is exactly where many of us are with the Bible; not just non-Christians, but Christians as well, trying to operate our Christian faith by trial and error without referring much to the Bible. We leave it on the shelf, like the DVD player instructions, and we try to bash on our own and hope we'll be OK. If problems come in our faith, we blame God or the church or each other; like me, getting cross with the machine or accusing Kathy or our son of having messed it up. And if we don't read the Bible for ourselves, we have to rely on other people for our teaching (in church on Sunday, or the person leading our Home Group, or Songs of Praise), just like me relying on Kathy to operate the DVD player; and, of course, all that is second-hand teaching. And when Kathy was out and we had a group discussion on what to do: that's like many of us Christians in church today, pooling our

ignorance no-one with much of a clue and just hoping to goodness we'll connect with God.

So why do people leave the Bible on the shelf so much?

Here are some reasons:

1/ "It's difficult to understand and it's hard work, so let's rely on other people to digest it and then to give us easily digestible bits." That's the baby bird syndrome, except that we'll never grow up to look in the Bible for our food ourselves that way.

2/ "We know people disagree about how to interpret the Bible, which makes us mistrust it or think, 'How on earth can we sort out the truth if very knowledgeable Christians disagree about it?' So don't try."

3/ "In today's gospel reading Jesus criticises the Jews for missing the point when studying the Bible. So why study it at all if it's easy to miss the main point?"

4/ "It's got nasty bits in it, and we like to be tolerant, so instead of struggling with the nasty bits, let's ignore them. Better not to read the Bible or just read the nice bits."

5/ "We like to pick and mix in our spiritual life, and we like to be in control, so we dabble with this and that." (I meet people who combine Christianity with reincarnation, mediums or belief in space ships!) And, of course, we must be tolerant: "Don't you dare criticise me! It's all spiritual, and it helps me....!"

And yet if we don't study the Bible, how on earth can we stay close to God and be firm in our faith? When Jesus was tempted, by the Devil, he replied each time, "It is written..." He knew his Bible and he knew that God wouldn't contradict anything in the Bible. And when the Devil got wise to this and quoted the Bible back at him, Jesus knew and understood the Bible better, so was able to stand up to him. It's the Bible that tells us what God is like and how he

operates; it tells us what is right and wrong according to God. And, of course, some bits are difficult to understand or may seem to contradict each other: that's why in the Wednesday morning service and in Home Groups we discuss passages and compare them with other bits of the Bible. It's why on Sundays I sometimes ask you what you think and sometimes I play Devil's advocate, to try to get us all thinking and to challenge us all, myself included. Reading the Bible should not make us more rigid and intolerant. It should make us more confident about our faith and therefore more open to listening to others. It should also make us more humble and aware that we may be wrong, not more hard-line.

I started this talk with the DVD player; let me end with a visit to the Doctor. You'll have noticed the huge change in our attitudes that has taken place over the last, say, 30 years: instead of our seeing doctors as all-knowing experts who will always diagnose our ailments accurately and give us the right treatment, we now weigh up what they say, research our ailments on the internet, read the small print inside our medicine packages, and challenge our Doctor. We know, too, that they make mistakes and are fallible as people. So we take responsibility for our health. Doctors encourage this by saying, "You take the decision. These are the pro's and con's..."

Just as people question doctors, they are certainly sceptical about what clergy and Christian "experts" say. But unfortunately that doesn't seem to lead them to take responsibility for their spiritual health. They just opt out altogether or concoct woolly mixtures of Martians, Jesus, horoscopes and crystals.

God has given us the Bible and it's in English and in

versions we can understand. Let's take responsibility for our own spiritual welfare, read it and wrestle with it. That's the key to knowing and understanding God better.

Chris van Straaten