

Sermon for the Third Sunday of Epiphany

He rolled back the scroll, gave it to the assistant and sat down. And all eyes in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to speak to them “Today in your hearing this text has been fulfilled”.

Luke 4.21

Our three readings all ‘read into’ one another. The Old Testament Reading (Nehemiah 8.2-6,8-10) and Gospel Reading tell us of the awe and of the wonder associated with sacred scripture. When Jesus reads the text out of the scroll and of bringing ‘Good News to the poor’ he is not speaking not as a news reader but as the Messiah, the chosen one. He declares that in his own being this piece of scripture has (note past tense, something that has already come to be) already been fulfilled. St Luke the artist writer adds two lovely details, of how he handed back the scroll to the assistant, and of how ‘all eyes were fixed on him’. No wonder! In Jesus, what has been written as sacred now stands before them as the real thing.

But there is more. There is the fact of what the Messiah has come to bring : Good News to the poor, liberty to captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the downtrodden. And the second reading from St Paul (1 Corinthians 12.12-30) advances the idea of a church as ‘The Body of Christ’, which though having many parts, is not a disparate community but is actual the physical embodiment of Christ who is for the Church its source of life, its embodiment and its beating heart. It is in this respect that Christ ringing declaration of himself as ‘fulfiller of the past’ is now made present before their eyes as he is present for us in the Church.

*Fulfiller of the past,
Promise of things to be,
We hail Thy body glorified
And our redemption see. (From ‘Tis Good Lord to be Here’)*

*Christ has no body now but yours
No hands, no feet on earth but yours
Yours are the eyes through which He looks
compassion on this world
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*

St Teresa of Avila

It is important firstly that we understand the age-old importance attached to the written word, and of the importance associated with sacred scripture as containing ‘proof’ text for the believing community. That remains vitally true for the great monotheistic religions – Judaism (The Torah) Christianity (The Bible) and Islam (The Koran). All exist as religions of the Book. And the texts that lie within them are sacred, holy and inviolable, even though they come under scrutiny and interpretation from theologians and the faithful. And we have examples of how these texts are rendered truly precious in the Book of Kells, and in the beautiful calligraphy that decorates some of the world’s most famous mosques, and of the Jewish Torah still housed in beautifully decorated scrolls of parchment.

In this church, the whole first third of the Mass is taken up with that is called 'The Ministry of the Word', at whose heart lies this sermon but more formally our three readings from scripture, which enjoy an ascending hierarchy, from the Old to the New Testament, and then to the Gospel Reading, containing the words of Christ himself. This reading is given greatest importance, having its own organ fanfare, a procession with candles with the Gospel Book held aloft both at the beginning of this service and before the Gospel is read. The Gospel book is censed and alleluias sung in its presence. In liturgical terms the Gospel reading is designed to emerge out of the Mass like the tolling of a bell. The Gospel is a ringing declaration of God's purposes, just as it was in that synagogue. In Christian churches, all eyes are ordered to turn toward the Book as they were turned to Christ in the synagogue. Only now the text from the Gospel reading is to be fulfilled in our presence and in our own life together as Christ's Body, The Church.

And so this Gospel reading from St Luke takes us in the person of Jesus Christ from TEXT to CONTEXT. The scriptural texts and The Gospel Readings are not there for their beauty and instructional value alone. They are read solemnly and with fanfare because they are to awaken us to the realities that face us in the current time. Scripture texts are there to be 'fulfilled' and to be 'revealed' in our life together. In this way the Word is there to become flesh.

The Moderator of the Church of Scotland on presenting our King with the Bible at his Coronation said:

*These are the lively Oracles of God.
We present you with this Book,
the most valuable thing that this world affords.
Here is Wisdom;
This is the royal Law;*

And the Collect for Advent (From The Book of Common Prayer) says:

*Blessed Lord, who hast caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning:
Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest
them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold
fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour
Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Do we read the Bible as though it mattered to us and to our lives? The Reading of Scripture has been described as 'Lectio Divina' 'Divine Reading', but this is not like reading a newspaper or a novel. This is reading as prayer and contemplation, in which words and phrases become infused with the divine. It is through our reading of scripture, and in its 'inward digesting' that we become alive to the truth that would both grant us wisdom and at the same time set us free. In such a way, scripture can and has, surely been fulfilled. It has been fulfilled in our very presence.

Christopher Cawrse, 2025

Holy Cross Church Cromer Street