

## **A collection of books**

A sermon prepared by Revd William Whyte for Bible Sunday 1 November 2020

*Refs: Nehemiah 8.1-4a,8-12; Colossians 3.12-17; Matthew 24.30-35*

Quite early on in my marriage, my mother-in-law suggested that I convert to Judaism. It was a kindly offer and well meant. She'd seen or heard yet another story on the news about the Church in particular or Christians in general doing something miserable – either behaving badly or condemning someone else for behaving badly – and thought I might want an out. It wasn't just that Judaism was rarer and thus more glamorous than Christianity, she stressed, it was also that it was more fun. "The good thing about Judaism," she exclaimed, "is that there are no rules."

Well, I didn't convert, and I'm not a rabbi, and it's not for me to tell my mother-in-law that she's wrong. Rules, I'd always rather imagined, were the whole point of Judaism. As the old joke goes, a boy goes to see the rabbi to say that he can no longer pray because he no longer believes in God. The rabbi merely tells him, "Yes God, no God: doesn't matter! Three times a day, you PRAY!"

But – as I say – my mother-in-law was being kind when she suggested I convert. And her argument had a point. For her, the spirit more than the letter of the law was what mattered. Judaism wasn't about a set of strict rules – she liked bacon too much for that. Rather, it was a code of conduct; an ethos; a way of being. Christianity, by contrast, seems to her – as it does to many people – a rather narrow, rather rigid, rather disapproving creed: one that's all too quick to condemn and which often fails to live up to its own strict injunctions. Christians are often seen as either killjoys or hypocrites, and they're often seen as both: at one and the same time condemning others for doing what they are doing, or would like to do, themselves.

And, of course, on Bible Sunday, it's worth remembering that the Bible is often blamed for this. People look at that big black book and see, not salvation, but condemnation. The Bible has been so often used by Christians as a tool to rebuke or to criticize – a set of laws that say no, no, no – that many people simply don't want to read it at all. It's been waived in the face of women who wanted to preach and teach as priests. It's been quoted to condemn the divorced, the gay or lesbian, the unconventional, the rule breakers. "Because the Bible says so" is a phrase beloved of those who oppose change and seek to tell others how to lead their lives. Small wonder that that many people's natural reaction to the Bible is simply to ignore it. Small wonder, too, that many Christians respond rather like the Israelites of our first reading: not with joy, but weeping; seeing the Bible as book that tells them just how wrong they are.

This is not how things are meant to be. Just as Ezra says to the Israelites, the Bible should not provoke weeping and regret, but joy and celebration: "do not be grieved," he says, "for the joy of the LORD is your strength." "Do not mourn or weep", he says, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD." That should surely be our response to the Bible and Bible Sunday. Instead, so many people find quite the reverse. What is to be done?

The answer, I think, will come if we try to understand what the Bible actually is. And what it's not. What it is, is a collection of books, written and edited over many thousands of years, by many different people in many different places with different ideas and different ways of expressing them – often to very different ends. What it's not is a single body of rules: a sort of holy Highway code, spelling out in detail exactly what to do and when. When people say the Bible (singular) says this or that (singular), they are almost always wrong. Exceptions and contradictions can almost always be found. When Christians use the Bible to say unconditionally that women shouldn't preach, or that equal marriage isn't allowed, or that sinners should be punished, they ignore all the other moments when the Bible seems to say quite the reverse.

The Bible, in other words, is not, a big black book that says "Thou Shalt not". It is, rather, the record of an on-going conversation: a discussion between God and His People and between the many different people who have pledged themselves to God. And it's a discussion that continues to this day – one that we, as Christians, are invited to be part of here and now. That's, in a sense, what

the Church is: the biggest, longest running book group in history. And just like any book group, people will disagree: one will like one thing; another will dislike it and prefers something else. And that's fine – because that was how the Bible itself was written and how it's been read from the first.

We get a sense of what this means in our epistle, where we are given a glimpse of the early church: groups of people brought together for teaching and preaching, psalm singing and much more besides. All this was rooted and grounded in Biblical study – and they often disagreed. The story of the early church is of successive battles about basic principles and high theological ideas. Variety, not unanimity has always characterized Christianity – and it always will, precisely because our holy text, our Bible, is an invitation to debate much more than it is a set of answers, and far more than it is a clear-cut collection of rules.

It's in those debates and in our coming together to debate that we will encounter something of God. That's surely what our Gospel promises us today. It promises that we will see signs of the kingdom; that we will be granted glimpses of God. "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place." And it is through the Bible that this will happen. Not because if we're good, we'll be rewarded. Not because we're somehow special and can sit in judgement on others. But, because, in our coming together to read and debate the Bible, we will indeed help create that Kingdom of God.

**Amen**