

Unread Bestseller

A Sermon preached by Geoff Oates on Bible Sunday 2017

When Kath and I got married, straight after leaving university, we hadn't a penny between us, and neither did our college friends who made up most of the guests. So we were very careful to make sure our wedding present list covered the essentials - cheaply.

The priorities were bedding and a basic dinner service.

In spite of this, one or two well-meaning relatives furnished us with some lovely delicate and expensive items of glass and porcelain. We wrapped these up carefully and put them away safely in my mum's attic so they didn't get damaged; no doubt hoping that one day we'd have a nice big house and a glass fronted sideboard to display them in.

And guess what! 32 years later, they're still in the loft, at our house now since my mum passed away, still wrapped up and in the same cardboard box. Whilst the faithful Marks & Spencer Harvest dinner service is still gracing our kitchen table, breakfast, lunch and supper, as it has done almost every day since we got married.

The Bible is still, even in increasingly secular Britain, a big selling book. Most families have one. But I cannot help feeling that in most households, the bible is treated rather more like the expensive decorative glass and porcelain that sits unused in a sideboard - or in the attic - than it is like the hard-wearing crockery we use day by day. And that is not good.

What about your bible? Is it showing the right amount of wear and tear for its age? Is it well thumbed, the spine nice and soft, the cover worn at the edges? A few bits of sticky tape here and there? Maybe even a few fly-notes and underlinings here and there? I hope so. Because the Bible is not meant to sit in a display case like a treasured souvenir of an old friendship. It's

meant for daily use. It is the greatest material resource God has given us.

As we have celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Revolution, it's good to remind ourselves what a privilege we have. For Martin Luther's greatest achievement was his translation of the bible into German. He was determined that the Christian Church should rediscover its scriptural roots, and that everyone should explore the word of God for themselves, and not just a small elite of educated monks and priests who had learned Latin.

For centuries, ordinary Christians in the pews had little idea of what was in the Bible. The leadership of the Church was very happy to keep it that way, because so many of the things that made up the routine of 16th century spiritual life had become far removed from their scriptural roots, or simply weren't mentioned in the Bible at all; the rituals and sacraments and ceremonies of the Church; the practice of paying for masses to be said for your soul; the fear of purgatory; the rule of celibacy for Priests and monks and nuns; praying to saints or venerating their relics.

Luther wasn't the first man to argue for the bible to be made available in modern language. John Wycliffe and his Lollards completed the first English translation of the whole Bible a full 150 years before Luther. The Church successfully suppressed it.

But even that wasn't the beginning. The Gospels and the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) were first translated into Old English in the 10th century - and a delightful letter survives written by a monk and scholar named Aelfric to his patron expressing his grave doubts about letting the Word of God get into the "wrong hands". What will ordinary people say when they read that Abraham had two wives (Genesis 16v2)? We've told them they can only have one! Worse than that, what will the Priests and Monks say when they read

that St Peter, the first Pope, had a wife (Mark 1 v30)? We've always told them they can't marry at all, because the Apostles didn't. We can't trust the ordinary to go exploring the Word of God – they'll get lost on the way!

But Luther did have faith in ordinary people to make that journey of discovery. A faith that the Roman Church of the 16th century still lacked. Sadly, many of the protestant traditions that claim their inspiration from Luther and Calvin have also lacked that faith. They have led their followers down narrow, carefully chosen paths, steering them clear of those passages that do not support their own viewpoints, encouraging them to 'believe the Bible' but not to explore it.

They have got it wrong too. The bible is a wonderful kaleidoscope of myths, legends, tribal history, theology, moral and civil laws, praise and liturgy, prophecy, parables and teaching. Written by dozens of authors over hundreds of years and addressed to readers whose view of the world was very different from ours. Yes, we do need guides and signposts to help us along on our journey of discovery – but we definitely don't need 'keep out' signs.

There are those who worry we'll find the Bible full of contradictions. Some Christians get very indignant about this and put together complicated theological arguments, to reconcile everything in it into a neat tidy package. We don't need to do that. The Bible is full of contradictions. Rejoice in that. It is a sign of its honesty. Mankind's journey to discover its God has never gone in a straight line. It has been full of diversions, cul-de-sacs, and missed turnings. The Bible doesn't try to hide that.

The Bible does not dictate to us the answers to life's great questions. On so many issues it shows us both sides of the debate, and invites us to seek for a truth that can be real to us. Is he a tribal God, the God of one race or region, or is He the Lord and creator of us all? Is he a God of justice, whose faithfulness to his obedient followers demands punishment for those who

disobey, or is he a God of mercy whose Grace has no limits? Is he a God of ritual and ceremony, or a God of intimacy and spontaneity? Is he a God of Kings and patriarchs, or is he the God of the poor and humble? Is he a distant and unknowable God, or is he our friend and companion? Does he really care all that much about our sex lives? Is he only a 'he' (Genesis 1v27)? Is he more concerned about our life before death, or our life after death? Just who or what is this Jesus? Man or God or both? And is He really coming back?

On your journey of faith I hope you will have wrestled with some or all of those questions, and many more. The Bible allows us to share the journeys that others from Abraham to St Paul have made before us, and see what answers they have found. Use your privilege - read it!

Editor's note: There are a number of Bibles in the All Saints Library, which can be borrowed, along with some of theologian Bishop Tom Wright's New Testament commentary/translation 'For Everyone'. Do have a 'dip' in them.

