

“GOING BY THE BOOK”

Romans 10:17

In these few weeks after Easter, we're looking at what happened to the disciples as they struggled to come to terms with everything that had happened over that amazing weekend. The events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday revolutionised their lives and changed the world in a way that was totally unique. By the evening of Easter Sunday they had plumbed the depths of despair and climbed the heights of joy and relief. Even Thomas, as we saw last week, who'd missed out on all the initial fuss and was rather unsure about what everyone else was saying, came to recognise and confess that Jesus was not only alive, but was worthy of his worship and Lord and God.

Jesus, of course, did his best to try and reassure them all and to help them find some way of fitting all that had happened into their view of the world. Their experience was something that no-one had really had either before or since. They didn't really know how to cope with it all, how to see it as the culmination of all that had happened and the start of a whole new project, the mission of God's kingdom. To do that, Jesus does two or three very important things. Firstly, of course, he appears to them and speaks with them. That in itself is a pretty good reminder that he is alive and well and ready for them to take over the baton of spreading the message of the Kingdom. But he also reminds them of his own words – with the help of the angels who were waiting for them at the empty tomb. He's done things “*just as he said*”, they told the bewildered women, “*Remember what he said.*”

And he also shows his followers just how all this fits in with the Scriptures, with the texts with which they would have been familiar through their attendance at synagogue and their many conversations with him over the past three years. That's most clearly stated by Luke, both in his story of the two people walking out to Emmaus (*Luke 24:13ff*) and as he reports what happened when Jesus appeared to the rest of them later that evening (*24:36ff*). In both situations Jesus explained what had happened by referring to the Hebrew Scriptures. As he said to the whole group, “*Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms*”. And Luke continues “*The he opened their minds so that they could understand the Scriptures. He told them ‘This is what is written ...’*” And in doing so, he reignites their faith.

That vital link – the link between the words of Jesus, the Message, and the faith of those who hear – is at the heart of what Paul is writing about in *Romans 10*, from which we've just read. You'll have picked up from those verses that Paul is referring to the Jewish people and their attitude to the message, the gospel, but it's set in the wider context of Paul's theology which applies to all people. The message of Jesus and the faith of the Christian are inextricably linked – “*Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.*” Now there are all kinds of things we could say this

morning about the way those words are put together, the way they're translated and the relationship between them and the rest of what Paul is saying, but I'll spare you most of that and sum up what could otherwise be a very long discussion indeed by saying that this message which ignites or re-ignites our faith is at the very heart of the Bible and it's why Jesus refers back to it when he's trying to help the disciples after the resurrection.

It's a message which is imperative to faith – both to coming to faith in the first place and to growing and developing in that faith. It's a message that does for us today what it did for those first followers of Jesus so many centuries ago. It helps us to make sense of our own experience, seeing how what happens to us and to our world is part of God's greater Kingdom agenda. And it lays the foundation for our future and ongoing discipleship, by inspiring, challenging, encouraging and, sometimes, rebuking us, by holding a mirror up to us and showing us more clearly things about God, about our world and about ourselves.

Paul writes that this message is heard "*through the word of Christ*". Once again, the scholars will tell you that there's a bit of ambiguity in that phrase, an ambiguity that is apparent both in Greek and in English. Are we talking about the very words of Christ himself, the things he said and taught? Or are we talking about the things that are said *about* Christ, the gospel story and all its implications? Well, in practice it really boils down to the same thing – and anyway we have both things preserved for us and handed down to us in the form of The Bible. So how's that all linked together? Three things about Jesus and The Bible and three things about us and The Bible.

1. CHRIST LOOKS BACK TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

We see this most clearly apparent in the story we've already mentioned, but there are other places in the gospel accounts where we can see that Jesus looks back to and builds upon the Hebrew Scriptures, the texts with which his listeners would have been familiar. In *Luke 24* we have those two occasions where Luke tells us explicitly that Jesus explained what he was doing and what his mission was in the light of the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms – the three sections of the Scriptures that we now refer to as the Old Testament. He looked back and demonstrated how this was all really about the way in which God was going to come into the world to put right the wrongs that had been visited on the world through the sin of humanity. He was going to send his Messiah, his chosen and anointed representative, and this Messiah, this Christ, would live, suffer, die and be restored to life as part of God's great plan for the redemption of creation and the salvation of humanity. It was through careful reading of the Old Testament that people would be able to make sense of the mission of Jesus and the events which had so recently burst into the

lives of the disciples. Without the Old Testament, it was impossible to understand what Jesus had done and what the eternal consequences of that would be.

2. CHRIST RE-INTERPRETS THE OLD TESTAMENT

Much of what Jesus would have shown the disciples on that first Easter Sunday evening would have been a straightforward reading of Jesus' life and mission into the narrative of the Old Testament. There were plenty of prophecies that were very clearly and unambiguously fulfilled through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. But there were other parts that Jesus re-interpreted in the light of his Kingdom mission. Usually he makes it clear himself that that's what he's doing. Just a couple of examples will illustrate what I mean. Think back to those passages in the Sermon On The Mount where Jesus takes words from the Old Testament and then reworks them to show just what he's about. In *Matthew 5, 6* he quotes the Old Testament laws about murder, adultery, divorce, retribution and tithing, and then re-states them for a whole new world, a world of holiness, a world where attitudes are as important as behaviour.

And later, in that emotion-charged upstairs room on the night of his betrayal and arrest, he goes to the very heart of the Jewish system of ritual and remembrance to put himself at the centre of the Passover, re-interpreting the sacrifice of the Passover lamb as his own death, in a way that we shall shortly be doing ourselves. And as we zoom out from those two closely focussed examples we see that the whole of the Gospels are doing just as Jesus does – re-interpreting the Old Testament in the light of Jesus' life and teaching. Matthew, particularly, quotes frequently from the Hebrew Scriptures, and Luke also draws some strong parallels. Mark and John are less explicit, but there's no disguising their awareness that what Jesus is doing is all of a piece with what's gone before. Not only the Old Testament and Jesus' use of it are part of the message of Christ, but so are the gospel accounts themselves.

3. OTHERS REPORT AND INTERPRET CHRIST

And then, of course, we have the *Acts of the Apostles* and the letters which make up the remainder of our Bibles. Most of *Acts* is narrative, straightforward reporting, but it includes those sermons and other sayings which begin to relate the life and teaching – the message – of Jesus to the situations faced by men and women in the everyday world. The letters of Paul, Peter, John, James and so on go further, interpreting the words of Jesus and starting to draw it all together in a way that can truly be called the word of Christ. Here is the message which is so vital for us today, so vital for a world which is in desperate need of hearing the gospel, so vital for a church which is called to make that gospel known.

The message that is vital for our faith, then, is the message that comes to us through the word of Jesus Christ, the word which now brings together the Old Testament, the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament – Jesus re-telling and re-interpreting the age-old story of God’s grace and his activity in the world. If we are to grow in faith – and to lead others to faith – then this is the message that needs to be heard. We need to take seriously – for it is, indeed, a matter of life and death – this word, this Bible that we hold in our hands. For if we do not take it seriously, then we end up as the man whom Jesus describes in *Matthew 7:24ff*, in that familiar story of the two builders. But what does it mean to take it seriously? How can this message help us in our faith?

1. STUDY IT

Paul writes that “*faith comes through hearing the message*”. In his very orally-oriented culture it did come through hearing for most people – hence his insistence on preaching and proclamation. Without in any way wanting to diminish the importance of preaching and teaching, I want to urge you to read this book. Read it, study it, learn it, reflect on it, familiarise yourself with it. Jesus opened the Scriptures to the couple on the road to Emmaus and he opened the minds of the other disciples so that could understand the Scriptures. You’ve just got to read it – there is no other way to familiarise yourself with it. (And by reading I also mean listening to it on CD, MP3 and all that.) Find out where the various books are. Read bits of it out loud to yourself to help it sink in, Use other books to help you understand it. Follow a daily reading scheme. But do it regularly and frequently. I’m often amazed at people who can sing along word perfect to songs on the radio, or who can recite film dialogue along with the film on television or who can quote chunks of novels or poetry that they’ve had to learn for exams. We should be doing that with the Bible, with the message, with the word of Christ. If you don’t read the Bible daily already, make a start this week, for without that your faith will be diminished.

2. SHARE IT

One of my aunties had a habit, which can often be witnessed in the Church Office on occasions, by which whenever anyone said or did anything she’d sing an appropriate line of a popular song to you. (When the window cleaner turned up, we’d have a snatch of George Formby: if a cup of tea was offered, Bernard Cribbins would be remembered.) In a sense, we ought to be doing that with the word of Christ – quoting it, referring to it, sharing it with those around us. It’s a help to each other’s faith if we can encourage one

another with words of Scripture from time to time. (It can become a bit of an irritant if that's all you ever do, of course.) Build one another up with the word of Christ, the message which brings faith.

But share it with others as well, with those who as yet have not come to faith. Be prepared to use the word of Christ appropriately when you have opportunity. You might not be quoting verses verbatim as you would do with those who share your faith, but sharing something of the gospel message with others is vital if they are to have an opportunity to respond to Jesus. Isn't that what Paul is saying in the earlier verses in this chapter (*Romans 10:14ff*)? "*Faith comes from hearing the message*" – there's a great defence of preaching and proclamation there, but it's also about hearing it in conversation, in daily interaction, in the very fabric of our everyday lives, about speaking out plainly and prophetically into a society which has lost any notion of a shared set of values and divinely appointed message.

3. LIVE IT

And, of course, this is where the rubber hits the road, It has to make a difference in our lives. If we are studying the message, the word of Christ, if we are sharing it clearly and uncompromisingly with the community around us, if we are speaking it into a world which seems to have no inkling that God loves it and wants to redeem it, then it will transform us in every way. As we hear what Jesus has to say, as we read the Old Testament through the lens of his life and teaching, as we immerse ourselves in the letters in which Paul, Peter and the others show us what following Jesus is really all about, then we will want to live lives that are radically different from those of the people whose lives are shaped by the message of the world around – the advertisers, the celebrities, the television freak-show hosts, the newspaper columnists and the agony aunts whose words drip daily, hourly into our minds and poison our attitudes and warp our behaviour. If we truly want to grow in faith as disciples of Jesus Christ we need to hear his word, to listen to his message, to live out day by day the truths that are contained in this Bible.

You have heard the message. You know the gospel. But keep listening to it. Keep reading it. Keep studying and sharing and living it. For without that, not only will your faith be stunted, but those around you will be denied the opportunity to respond to Jesus and grasp the hope that he holds out of a fulfilled life now and a life of peace for all eternity.

Discussion questions on next page

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Luke 24:36-49; Romans 10:14-17

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There were plenty of prophecies that were very clearly and unambiguously fulfilled through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. But there were other parts that Jesus re-interpreted in the light of his Kingdom mission. Look at *Matthew 5,6* and at the way Jesus shares the Passover.

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4. STUDY IT

Read the Bible, study it, learn it, reflect on it, familiarise yourself with it. Jesus opened the Scriptures to the couple on the road to Emmaus and he opened the minds of the other disciples so that could understand the Scriptures. You've just got to read it – there is no other way to familiarise yourself with it.

5. **SHARE IT**

It's a help to each other's faith if we can encourage one another with words of Scripture from time to time. And share it with others as well, with those who as yet have not come to faith. Be prepared to use the word of Christ appropriately when you have opportunity. (Look at *Romans 10:14ff*)?

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Questions for discussion

1. Why was it so important for Jesus to use the Scriptures when speaking to his disciples?
2. Find some examples from The Law, The Prophets and The Psalms of prophecies which look forward to Jesus' life and death. How do you respond to them?
3. Why do you think so many of us are reluctant to read the Bible regularly? Do you find it easy or difficult? Why?
4. How can sharing words from the Bible be a help to the faith of other Christians?
5. Paul writes about preaching in *Romans 10:14,15*. Do you think preaching is still useful or has it had its day? Why?
6. In what ways can living out what we read in the Bible transform us and influence other people?
7. What has struck you most forcibly in reading these passages and discussing them? What will you do about it?