

Being nourished by the Bible

The first question we need to ask ourselves is whether it's right to look for nourishment from the Bible. It wasn't written for us primarily and the books within it came into being for many reasons: to tell the story of God and God's people, to exhort, challenge, castigate, correct, inspire, uplift. Some of it was written to specific communities and some was a personal and heartfelt response to life and circumstance.

Nevertheless, I think we are right to seek to be fed by the Bible. And thankfully, the Church agrees with me.

The Roman Catholic Church tells us that

' . . . such is the force and power of the Word of God that it can serve the Church as her support and vigour and the children of the Church as strength for their faith, food for the soul and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life.'
(Catechism para 131)

The Protestant tradition believes that all things necessary to salvation are found within Scripture – and presumably the path to salvation is paved with tasty morsels of biblical text - and if Scripture is God-breathed (2 Tim 3.16) then surely it must give us nourishment as we learn to take it deep within our hearts and souls – as well as studying it with our minds.

And if you're not yet convinced, let's interrogate Scripture itself to see if there are any good examples which can help. We'll think about 3 texts.

- Towards the end of the Exile, we find Ezra and the Levites reading from Torah at the request of the people. This is probably part of an act of worship at a feast time. Ezra and the Levites did not only *read* scripture but 'gave them the sense' and 'caused them to understand.' (Nehemiah 8.1 – 12). The people's initial response is to weep and wail because they know they have failed miserably to keep the Law given by Yahweh to their ancestors. But they are enjoined not to grieve but to 'feast yourselves in rich food and sweet drinks . . . for joy in the Lord is your strength.' Hearing Scripture challenges them but also enables them to understand how they can find 'joy and strength' in a fresh connection with God 'because they had understood the reading.'
- In Acts 8. 26 – 39, we hear the story of Philip and the eunuch. When Philip finds him, the eunuch has been to worship in Jerusalem and is reading from Isaiah so he must have had some faith and knowledge. But he's not clear about the story of the sheep led to the slaughter. Philip doesn't need much encouragement and tells him not only about the text but also about

the good news of Jesus Christ. So convincing an evangelist is he that baptism follows immediately and the eunuch goes on his way rejoicing.

- The disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24. 13 – 35) are not in the most optimistic frame of mind. Their Lord and Master has met a tragic end; their hopes for a new Kingdom have been in vain; life and faith seem to be a bit pointless. But the stranger who accompanies them ‘beginning with Moses and all the prophets’ explains to them all the things that ‘referred to himself’, though they don’t recognise him until he breaks bread. Only then do they remember how their hearts burned within them when the Scriptures were opened.

So how do we find such nourishment? How do we so engage with the word of the Lord that our lives are changed and we learn to recognise the power of God at work within us or the friend who walks beside us?

We find it through a regular and imaginative relationship with the biblical texts – not just in the form of the book we have on our bedside table or in our briefcase but on all the other occasions Scripture impinges upon us. eg at worship and especially within the sacraments. But if we

- always use the same bible reading notes or websites,
- only read our favourite books or our Rector’s favourite passages,
- disengage our brains when we read Scripture,
- try to go it alone without listening to other interpretations,
- never expect to be surprised by Scripture
- use it selectively to prove a point,
- underline our Bibles in fluorescent pink so that our eyes are always drawn to the same lines or
- make reading it a chore which must be done . . .

. . . then we are more likely to get indigestion or food poisoning.

For it may be that spiritual nourishment has a lot of similarities with bodily nourishment. Did you notice that two out of the three examples mentioned above made links between actual meals and spiritual food? We are whole people who need to nourish every part of our being. Just as we need the right vitamins, proteins and carbohydrates to fend off sickness and encourage physical growth and development, so we need the right Scriptural engagement to enrich our spiritual lives. But being fed – whether body or soul - involves much more than a good dietary plan. It’s about celebration and sharing, friendship and family. It’s about relationships, human and divine.

So choose a book of the Bible with which you are unfamiliar (just how much *do* you know about Habbakuk?) and invite some friends round for a meal – of both kinds.

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