

A favourite passage: Philippians 4.4-9

While Viceroy of India, during the Second World War, A P Wavell compiled the well-known anthology of poetry 'Other men's flowers', adding one of his own poems as the final piece. Allegedly, he did most of the work from memory; he was certainly a great recitalist of other people's poetry. Perhaps this anecdote can stand as a good symbol of how we can, each in our own way, use the Bible. It's good to hold in mind a collection of Bible phrases, stories and sayings. The spiritual wisdom we draw on in hard times need not be self-taught, but can often be well encapsulated in biblical verses. It is one thing to know where to go in the Bible for inspiration; it is another to carry some of that within ourselves. So I will be encouraging you through this year to memorise just a few passages. These familiar words will rise unbidden to the surface of your mind, often when most needed. You can learn a short passage by memorising it and, by repetition, to transfer it from your brain into your soul. I find that some passages naturally are found in my soul, thus requiring little effort to learn. It is as though the passage was made for me, and me for the passage. One example that works in this way for me is Psalm 46.10: 'Be still and know that I am God. I am exalted among the nations. I am exalted in the earth'. We all probably relish the phrase 'Be still' – but did you know the second half of the verse? We can be still because God is, because God is in charge, because God's glory cannot be dented or defeated by our anxiety.

So one of my favourite passages is Philippians 4.4-9 Why do I treasure this? Partly for the many associations I have with this passage on my spiritual journey. So I can recall being asked by my vicar a few weeks before my ordination as a priest what music and readings I wanted at my first Eucharist. There was no choice: without any thinking time, I replied 'Philippians 4.4-9 and the choir will sing the "Bell Anthem", a setting of these words with music by Henry Purcell'. More than 25 years ago, this passage summed up something of who I am and what the Christian faith means to me. Though self-expression is highly prized in our culture, there is something authentic about expressing ourselves through other people's words. We are drawn together and find a richer experience by acknowledging how much we have in common.

Or I can tell you about my year studying in Belgium at a Roman Catholic Seminary. One of the wisest and gentlest priests on the staff, Ward Oakshott, told me that his favourite biblical book was Philippians. Ever since, when I want to refresh my ministry and re-connect with the spiritual ideals I hold dear, I think of Ward and know that, if I am to become more like him, then I need to re-read Philippians. You will have your own personal associations. What I want to stress now is that these are important, however quirky, personal or coincidental they may seem to be. If we treat the Bible simply as an expression of objective truth, something to be studied and respected, then we are likely to be daunted by it. If we rather treat the Bible as a conversation – a conversation between God and the authors of each book, and also a conversation between the tradition and friends we love and respect – then it feels right to enjoy the snippets we overhear, or the stories we want to tell and re-tell.

At the beginning of this Bible Journal for 2011, I will be tempted to talk about the Bible. That will be good, but it must not exclude looking directly at the text itself. Some traditions within the Church, in using the Bible in that way, refer to it as a thing (almost, a weapon) rather than pointing us to the content itself. So what is there in Philippians 4.4-9 that so moves me?

- 1 'Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say rejoice' speaks of a confidence that banishes anxiety. We are to speak what is on our heart, for God longs to hear, and

will not be thrown by whatever we say. However dark the clouds are overhead, we can rejoice because God holds us in a way that we never be broken. 'The Lord is near'. I am reminded of another verse from the Psalms, 42.7: "deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts". In Philippians, Paul is not urging us to a permanent insincere jollity; rather he is declaiming that, in life, in death and beyond, God is with us so we can relax and relish being held by God.

- 2 Verse 7 gives us the words said nearly every Sunday in worship: 'the peace of God which surpasses all understanding....' This peace is so much more than stillness; it is not merely an emotional reaction within us, stimulated when we are quiet and happy. God's Shalom reaches beyond emotion to harmony, to living with the grain of the universe, to cooperation and commitment, to the sacrificial goodness that thwarts the darkest forces. I am reminded of Romans 8.28: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God" – God has made us and the world to work together in generosity and with care.
- 3 What about verse 8? "Whatever is true, honourable, pure, commendable, excellent, think on those things". I reckon the word "think" is too weak. Paul urges us to dwell, meditate, keep in mind anything that is good and nourishing. To invert this, if we only watch Horror movies, we will start to see the world filled with horror. We become better people by searching for what is good. As we learn to recognise goodness, and rejoice in excellent behaviour in others, so we become shaped by what we see.

My hope is that during 2011 we will, through this Bible Journal, find new ways of appreciating both the text within the covers of the Bible, and also what the Bible has done, and can do, for us. Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest!