

Towards the end

I am really pleased that we have successfully run this Bible Journal. We set out to make a small contribution to the 400th anniversary of the publication of the Authorised Version of the Bible. Each week we have published an article on some aspect of the Bible – a book, a passage, an overview, or how the Bible has been used. As the year progressed, we gathered a faithful group of readers. So it was thrilling for me to be asked for a printed copy of all the entries – we have made an impact, and people have been pleased to think more deeply about using their Bibles. The contributions from clergy and people in the congregation have been provocative, informative, fascinating and exciting. I am very grateful to all the contributors for their wise words. On only a few occasions did it become touch and go: “would there be an article ready for the publication time on Friday afternoon?” But for 52 weeks, the answer has been “yes”. I feel we marked ‘2011: the Year of the Bible’ well.

One of the clear lessons from all this is that the Bible is too important and influential to leave to any one of the Christian traditions. The Bible does not belong (to use the stereotype) to Evangelicals – but it is for the liberal Christian tradition (such as is typical within this parish) to be confident enough, and prepared to name how much the Bible means to us. I was delighted that Sarah Foot’s lecture (about early English translations) attracted 150 people on a warm autumn Saturday afternoon. This showed that the Bible as a historic and cultural object fascinates many people – and that religion and culture go together. On that day most people stayed for evensong and a sermon, as that felt the right way to conclude such a thoughtful moment. One of the themes I have been stressing this year is that we need to know some of the biblical stories and carry them within ourselves. We need to be people who care shaped by these stories, and can re-tell them without reading the Bible – *because we know them by heart*. After all, that is how the stories would originally have been told – mouth to mouth, ear to ear.

We can ask: what has this year achieved? In 2010 we discussed in the clergy team whether we should do some base-line testing so that we could accurately evaluate at the end of 2011 whether any behaviour has changed as a result of all the activities in this year (including the Bible Journal), but we decided against that. Perhaps we were taking to heart the parable of the Sower – for, in this story the farmer is implicitly commended for generous sowing, tossing the seed this way and that (and NOT planting solely on what is already recognised as good soil). So, I cannot prove what effect “2011: the Year of the Bible” has had, but feedback has been very positive. I hope you have enjoyed this journal.

So as I come to write the last entry in the Journal, my mind turns to the last book in the Bible: Revelation. This book is an odd mix of styles. In the first few chapters, the author writes some pointed and challenging letters to 7 churches set in what we now call west Turkey. These are understandable and well worth reading today for they contain spiritual challenges as appropriate for complacent 21st Century Guildfordians as for 1st Century eastern Christians. In the middle of Revelation there are some rather bizarre passages which are highly symbolic, using obscure imagery for the Old Testament. No one can be sure of some of the meanings of these chapters. Unsurprisingly this has been rich source for sectarian Christians who feel that the whole world is against them, and that it would be better if there was a complete purging of the surrounding culture.

Yet at the end of the book, the author pens one of the most lyrical passages in the whole of the Bible. It is as though he has seen through his angst, fear of persecution, and anger at the Roman Empire. Now at the end, he can focus once again on the Sovereignty of God. Revelation 21 begins 'And I saw new heaven and new earth.....' This passage is a bold declaration that God can surmount all troubles and that nothing can separate us from God's love. "Every tear shall be wiped away" is a bold yet comforting statement. This is not merely a declaration of what will happen at the end of time: note, this is a promise of a "new earth". So the passage coheres completely with one of the most important of all biblical passages – Jesus teaching us the Lord's Prayer where we pray for God's will to be done *on earth as in heaven*. God's salvation is not to be restricted to heaven, after the end of time – it belongs in our 'here and now'.

This is a passage that I feel I "live towards". That is to say, I seek to live in such a way that the passage is becoming true. I am prepared to give my life, my energy and my strength to the moment that makes this passage more fully real and true; here and now. So for me, Revelation is not about the end of time; it conveys something of what we are moving towards. If we give our best to God in our journey towards 'a new heaven and a new earth', then that is itself part of the fulfilment of this passage. This is summed up in a mix of images that forms part of the hymn 'How sweet the name of Jesus sounds':

My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,
accept the praise I bring.

At the end of this year, it is appropriate to say that the Bible connects us with our *Lord*; it shows us true *life*; it guides us in the *way*; and it tells us that our *end* will be completed by union with God when we will be "lost in wonder, love and praise".

Robert Cotton – 30 December 2011