

DIOCESE OF CHICHESTER

TO KNOW · LOVE · FOLLOW JESUS



YEAR OF THE BIBLE 2017

Hear the Word of the Lord

A Lent course for the Diocese of Chichester's
Year of the Bible

Session 1 – A Bible Overview

written by James Dunn and Ann Holt
and edited by Rebecca Swyer

Session introduction (5 minutes)

This will be the first time your group has met together so it might be worth participants briefly introducing themselves: divide 300 seconds by the number in the group to see how many seconds of 'airtime' each person has!

Suggested opening prayers (10 minutes)

Prayers and psalms can either be said 'responsorially' (i.e. a leader leads and others respond), or 'antiphonally' (i.e. two groups of voices, each saying alternate verses). One way of splitting a group is by birth month – Jan-Jun and Jul-Dec. Music / hymn / song suggestions are made, but whether or not to include them, accompanied or not, and at which stage, is entirely up to you.

O Lord, open thou our lips.

And our mouth shall proclaim your praise.

O God, make speed to save us.

O Lord, make haste to help us.

Verses from Psalm 78 (this translation is from the Common Worship psalter):

Hear my teaching, O my people;

incline your ears to the words of my mouth.

I will open my mouth in a parable;

I will pour forth mysteries from of old,

Such as we have heard and known,

which our forebears have told us.

We will not hide from their children, but will recount to generations to come,
the praises of the Lord and his power and the wonderful works he has done.

He laid a solemn charge on Jacob and made it a law in Israel,
which he commanded them to teach their children,

That the generations to come might know, and the children yet unborn,
that they in turn might tell it to their children,

So that they might put their trust in God
and not forget the deeds of God, but keep his commandments,

And not be like their forebears, a stubborn and rebellious generation,
a generation whose heart was not steadfast, and whose spirit was not faithful to God.

**Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.**

A prayer (the collect for Bible Sunday)

Blessed Lord,

who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning:

help us so to hear them,

to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them

that, through patience, and the comfort of your holy word,

we may embrace and for ever hold fast

the hope of everlasting life,

which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ,

who is alive and reigns with you,

in the unity of the Holy Spirit,

one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

Hymn/song suggestions: Thou whose almighty Word / O let the Son of God enfold you

Professor Dunn's introduction (10 minutes)

The Bible is a library. The library contains 66 books – 39 in the older part (the Old Testament) and 27 in the newer part (the New Testament). The writing of them took over 1,000 years. And the history they cover runs more or less from the beginning of time (creation) to about 100 AD.

Not that they are all historical works. Some do describe historical events – the patriarchs who were the forefathers of the people of Israel, much of the history of Israel, and the ministry of Jesus and the beginnings of Christianity. But other books are the records of Israel's prophets' most enduring utterances. Others again served in effect as Israel's praise books, the Psalms. And the New Testament is notable for the letters which were preserved from the early years of Christianity's expansion, principally those written by Paul to churches which he had founded.

So the Bible was written by many different people – hence the idea of the Bible as a library. In most cases we don't know who wrote down the books which became the Bible. But from very early days they were cherished as inspiring, and those who wrote them were regarded as inspired by God's Spirit. They were clearly treasured as fundamental to the readers' understanding of their history and faith, as Holy Scripture, witnessing to God's saving work from creation to crucifixion to consummation, and containing 'all things necessary to salvation' – the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) for Jews, the Bible as a whole, but particularly the New Testament, for Christians.

The first five books, the Torah, the books of the law, were the core of their religion for the people of Israel. The prophets were as challenging now as they had been then. And the Psalms in particular must have been familiar in Israel's regular worship. Similarly, the Gospels contained the teaching of Jesus, which must have been central to the self-understanding of the first Christians. And the letters of Paul especially must have been treasured by the churches which he founded, with copies probably being circulated from church to church.

Which books should be included in the Bible and be regarded as particularly sacred and authoritative, or 'canonical'? Those which belong to the Hebrew Bible were more or less agreed by the time of Jesus, and those which belong to the New Testament by the end of the second century. But what then to make of the Apocrypha, or 'hidden writings'.

The apocryphal or deuterocanonical books all emerged in the period between the Old Testament and the New Testament, that is, roughly speaking, in the last two or three hundred years BC. They were included in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint (LXX). The apocryphal writings are included in the Roman Catholic Bible, and the Greek Orthodox include some more. Anglicans value them 'for example of life and instruction of manners; but not to establish any doctrine'.

In the case of the New Testament, more or less all that was preserved from the first century Christian writings were included. Their ongoing valued use was itself proof enough of their inspiration and authority. The recently discovered Gospel of Thomas does not meet the measure (canon) set by the New Testament Gospels.

Textual scholars, working with the earliest known copies of the biblical texts (and their slight variations) have shown us that the Old Testament text used today is substantially the same as that read by Jesus and the first Christians. We can be even more confident that the Greek text of the New Testament used for our English translations today is more or less identical to what the New Testament authors wrote. It remains the witness and experience of the Church that through 'the word of the Lord' heard in Scripture, we encounter 'the word made flesh' in our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Group discussion (15 minutes)

1. Of the 66 Books of the Bible which is your favourite and why?
2. There are about 1,000 years between the writing of what became the first books and the last of the Bible. How has the understanding of God changed and developed during that period?

About the author of this reflection:

James D. G. "Jimmy" Dunn FBA was for many years the Lightfoot Professor of Divinity in the Department of Theology at the University of Durham. He has written at least twenty theology books.

Bible passage (5 minutes)

Either have the passage read out, or let each participant read it for themselves in silence, before moving on to the reflection:

Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on.

But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.

Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

Luke 24 27-32

Ann Holt's reflection (10 minutes)

In the eleven years before coming to Chichester Diocese I worked as Director of the National and International Programmes at the Bible Society. During that time I could almost guarantee that telling someone what I did would be something of a conversation stopper. My companions often expressed their incredulity that any one should care so much about the Bible that they would spend time and money on translating it and communicating it in this day and age!

About the author of this reflection:

Canon Dr. Ann Holt OBE is Diocesan Director of Education for Chichester Diocese.

After all as the Catholic comedian, Frank Skinner has put it:

"Once every house had a Bible in this country and read it; then they had a Bible and didn't read it. Now they don't have a Bible"

So at the beginning of this Lent period, in 2017, the Diocesan Year of the Bible, I have my first question for you to reflect on and discuss:

What do you do with your Bible? Do you read it? Do you study it? If so, why do you do so and if not, why not?

From the very beginning the Bible had to be translated to be understood. It is always a book in translation and to quote Rowan Williams "the most important translation is the translation of our lives". You see the Bible, under the inspiration of the Spirit of God Himself, is more than a book or several books. It becomes the voice of God. It speaks to our hearts and minds, hence the title of our course "Hear the Word of the Lord"

Much of the Bible is in the form of narratives that taken together create The Big Story. It is about the way things have been, are and will become. They are about Creation, Fall, Redemption and Future Hope. The voice of God invites us into this story, to live into it, to let it become our story. For it to do so, we have to let it captivate our hearts, minds and our imaginations. In short, to read us and to change us. Such transformation will not come about through cursory application of favourite texts or superficial proof texting. It requires a deeper engagement. Such engagement involves spending enough time in the written word to enable an encounter with the Living Word. It will connect us with Jesus.

Jesus is the content of the Bible. In the words of the theologian, Miroslav Volf, "the Bible is the primary site of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ".

Scripture is not primarily a moral code to live up to or a system of doctrine that says think this way and you will live well. The biblical way is to tell a story and invite us to live into it.

In the reading I have chosen, Jesus transformed the walk to Emmaus "By interpreting (to the walkers) the things about Himself in the Scriptures". As a result their hearts burned within them! They had what Charlie Cleverly describes as an "epiphany of the ordinary": Jesus revealing Himself to ordinary people on what started as an ordinary walk in real time and in a real place. It was transformed by the presence of Christ quoting Scripture.

The Bible story is packed with ordinary people like you and me, who met God in a similar way – Moses, Gideon, David, Daniel, Isaiah, Joel, Thomas, Peter, Paul and they in turn became the prophetic "words" to the world

around them. Which is our calling too. Lesslie Newbigin wrote "Through the Old Testament we get a picture of life as one in which we live in the biblical community whose story it is ...Our task is to carry the story forward"

So my next questions for reflection and discussion :

What are you doing in your life that carries the biblical story forward today? What kind of action might be described as a biblical action?

Where on your Emmaus Journey this Lent will God meet you?

The Bible story is a journey in itself. It begins in a garden and ends in a city where the Kingdom of God will finally be established. A remarkably prescient foretelling of how the world would develop! For the world to begin to see this "gospel of the Kingdom proclaimed throughout the whole world" (Matt 24, v. 14), it requires an authentic spiritual experience on the part of the Church, what Richard Rohr calls a spirituality of encounter. Encounters with God on walks to Emmaus have life-changing consequences. To make a difference we must be different. By engaging long enough and deeply enough with the written word we can encounter the Living Word on our journey and so become prophetic "words". Only then will we know and the world see that the Bible is not only the most translated book, the most widely circulated book in human history, which it is, but it really is the Book for today.

The most important translation is the translation of a transformed life. You may be the only translation your neighbours ever read!

Group discussion (20 minutes)

1. What do you do with your Bible? Do you read it? Do you study it? If so, why do you do so and if not, why not?
2. What are you doing in your life that carries the biblical story forward today? What kind of action might be described as a biblical action?
3. Where on your Emmaus Journey this Lent will God meet you?

Concluding prayer/worship (10 minutes)

Hymn / song suggestions: Take my life and let it be / Abba, Father, let me be

As a group, offer prayers of intercession for the church and for the world. In preparing to do this, participants are encouraged to reflect in silence, and then (if they choose) offer their prayer aloud, each time ending with:

Lord, in your mercy
Hear our prayer

The prayers of intercession may be concluded as follows:

Merciful Father
Accept these prayers, for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

A prayer (the Post Communion prayer for Trinity 6)

**God of our pilgrimage,
you have led us to the living water:
refresh and sustain us
as we go forward on our journey,
in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.**

The grace

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, evermore.
Amen.**

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