

Sermon on Zoom on Sunday 16 October 2022

by Rev. Bill Church

Readings: 2 Timothy 3. 14-17 & Luke 4. 16-22

The reading from 2 Timothy is one regularly heard on Bible Sunday, when the Collect urges us to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the Bible. “The Bible” in that context means the whole book as we have it.

But when Paul was writing to Timothy, by “scripture” he could only mean what we call the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Bible, because the New Testament had not yet been written; indeed, Paul was just then in the process of writing a fair chunk of it.

What, then, should be our approach to the Old Testament?

Notoriously, it records many bloody events in detail and with much gusto; it frames and endorses what now seem very regressive social attitudes; it has long lists of difficult names and tedious rules – look, for instance, at all those chapters in Exodus decreeing the exact furnishing of the tabernacle.

Maybe we should ignore it or treat it as an obsolete curiosity?

Some churches already pretty much do, thus following the early heretic Marcion, who treated the Old Testament as irrelevant to Christians.

Marcion was wrong, because it was the same God who inspired the writers of the Old as well as the New Testaments.

We should value and study the Old Testament because it was the scripture that Jesus knew, valued and read, and which was

familiar to his hearers. His preaching and teaching were full of it.

When Jesus said, "The only sign you shall have is the sign of Jonah," he expected his audience to know not just the story of the whale, but the whole story of how Jonah preached to the Assyrians of Nineveh (who at that time were about as popular in Israel as Putin is today in Ukraine), and they listened and repented, while the spiritually privileged Jews of Jesus' day neither listened nor repented.

Jesus preached, "You have heard it said of old time 'Thou shalt not kill'," quoting from the Ten Commandments.

He referred to the rejection of prophets, to David, to Solomon, to the creation story and so on.

During the Temptation, he repulses the devil with words from scripture.

In today's Gospel, Jesus reads from Isaiah as part of the synagogue service and comments on it: "Today this text has come true."

Jesus understood his ministry in the light of the Old Testament. And so did the gospel writers.

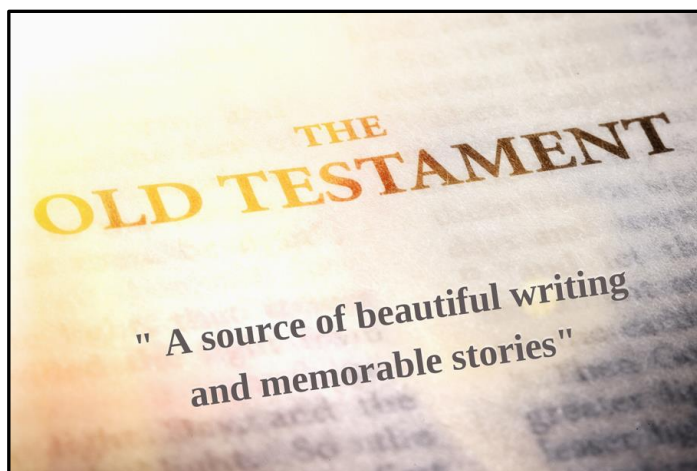
They saw Jesus as the Messiah promised in scripture and they constantly pointed to passages in the Old Testament to reinforce their argument about the role and status of Jesus – Matthew most of all.

"Thus was fulfilled the word of the prophet..." Isaiah or whoever.

To that extent, the Old Testament was valued by Christians because they found there prophecies – predictions - about Jesus, not always asking themselves whether the Old Testament writers had meant it that way.

One rather grisly example is where, at Golgotha, the soldiers are told to clear the crosses before the Sabbath began and they broke the legs of the two criminals, which would kill them quickly, but not of Jesus because they saw he was already dead. John's Gospel sees that as a fulfilment of Psalm 34, in that God protects the righteous so that none of their bones are broken, when more likely the original point of this detail was that Jesus really died and was not in some sort of coma.

It is not an exaggeration to say that without a knowledge of the Old Testament, Christians cannot understand the Gospels.



And, of course, it is, in its own right, a source of much beautiful writing and memorable stories - think of the Garden of Eden, Jacob's ladder, David and Goliath, Daniel in the lions' den and so on.

Modern readers should also note that the New Testament has little if nothing about how to relate to the natural world, but the Old Testament has much; from the wonder expressed in Psalm 104, to rules about treating animals and nurturing the soil.

And the Old Testament is one of the oldest surviving books in the world and the foundation of one of the oldest religions in the world.

When you hear the words “read, mark, learn and inwardly digest,” do not neglect to include the Old Testament.