

29th October 2023 – Good News #9 ‘The Bible – Life-Giving Truth’ (2 Timothy 3:10-17)

In 1897, the great American writer Mark Twain while staying in London is said to have read his own obituary in a British newspaper. The following day he sent a telegram to the press back in America with these famous words: “The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.”

Today we continue our Autumn series called ‘Good News’ by looking at the bible. And, just like Mark Twain, over the centuries many people have confidently but mistakenly predicted its death. As societies develop, surely an old bit of writing like the bible, whose content was finished more than 1900 years ago, and which first appeared in its current format about 1700 years ago – surely, it’s past its sell-by date? The 18th century writer and well-known atheist Voltaire was certain that by 1800 the bible would be finished in his homeland of France, that no-one would buy or read the bible anymore. In fact, in 1900, 122 years after his death, Voltaire’s house in Paris was the local distribution centre for the French Bible Society!

Hard as humanity has tried to stamp out the bible, it has always failed. **The bible is by a huge margin the best-selling book of all time.** There are an estimated 6 billion bibles in the world today, or 3 for every 4 people. It is translated into more than 2,000 languages, covering well over 90% of the world’s population. It never appears in best-selling book lists, because there would be no point – it would still be number one every year, by a massive margin. Over 150 million bibles are sold every year, not including all those that are distributed for free or downloaded on our phones.

And all this happens, despite the fact that it is illegal to own (or there are severe restrictions in owning) a bible in 31 countries around the world, and legal but risky to own a bible in a further 21 countries. That’s 52 countries, comprising about half of the world’s population. In many of these countries, believers will memorise chunks of the bible from the few copies that are available (which are passed around in secret from family to family), and write them out and fold them into their shoes when attending a secret Christian meeting, as they would be arrested if they were found walking the streets carrying a bible.

So, we have to ask two obvious questions: why are governments and rulers all through history so afraid of the bible? And despite this, why is the bible still so popular, so powerful, that all attempts to write it off, or stamp it out, fail? Today’s passage gives us a few clues.

Before we look at those clues, let’s understand what led to this letter being written. It was written by St Paul about 35 years after Jesus’ resurrection, and is probably the last letter he wrote before he died. He was an old man, in prison, and he knew he was going to die. So, in this letter are his last words, written to his friend Timothy, to whom he gave the task of carrying on his work. I wonder what you would write if you had one large sheet of paper to write your final words to your best friend? Paul says a number of things, but right here in the middle of his letter is the heart of it – **keep loving the bible, Paul says, stay true to the word of God. If you do that, everything else will fall into place.**

Why? Well, most importantly, because the bible is a book about God. Yes, we learn lots about being human from it, but it’s not self-help. It’s *God*-help – the power it has is from God: ‘all scripture is God-breathed’, Paul says, which is a lovely way of expressing it. When we read the bible, we’re not just reading some clever thoughts of other human beings; the humans that wrote the bible were inspired by a greater power. That’s why you can never stamp out the bible: because the dictators and the governments and all the others who try to stop the bible by locking up Christians or closing down bible warehouses (or whatever they do) are fighting the wrong battle. They’re fighting against God, and if you do that, you’ll always lose!

The bible has a power all its own, a power from above. So many people want to read the thoughts of God – well, they're right here, even if we sometimes have to work hard to understand them.

But let's look briefly at what this power of the bible is. Well, **first it makes us wise. It teaches us about what life is really about** – nowadays we obsess over data. The amount of data on the internet doubles every two years. We can absorb unlimited facts about anything nowadays. We can go on Youtube and learn any skill. But where do we learn to be truly human? Where do we learn how to be a better person, a better partner or parent or worker? Where do we learn how to say thank you and sorry and how to be humble and gentle, but also resilient and brave? We catch some of it from good role models, which is why we also need healthy communities – but the textbook is (this): the bible. The bible makes us wise for salvation – the word salvation has its roots in the word 'wholeness' – which we usually describe today as 'wellness'. Imagine that – long before we dreamed up the whole 'wellness' industry – 2,000 years ago Paul reminded his friend Timothy that bible was God's original wellness guide.

And where do we find this wellness, this wholeness? – what Paul calls salvation – 'through faith in Christ Jesus.' That's **the second thing we learn – the bible gives us faith. But importantly, faith in the right person.** You see, we all live by faith. When people tell me they have no faith, I'm too polite to say that of course they have faith, they just have faith in something else. Every life choice you make is a step of faith – because none of us can predict the future, we're all making decisions based at some level on faith. (And it takes a huge amount of faith to be an atheist!)

As we've been discovering on the Alpha Course, Jesus is really the key to life. His way is still the best way. It's not easy, but then nothing that's really worthwhile ever is. But it is in Jesus that we find love, joy, hope, purpose, and a peace that transcends our understanding. We find community and also ways to make a difference. And yes, you can find some of that in other places – but only Jesus offers us the whole package, because he's the source of life itself. And the best way to know life is to ask the one who created it.

So, the bible makes us wise, it gives us faith – and **finally, it empowers us to do good.** Scripture teaches and trains, Paul says, so that 'the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.' You see, following Jesus ultimately has to be a practical thing. It's not just about what we believe. We show what we believe by how we live. That's why all through a baptism service we emphasise *lifestyle* and not just declaring words of faith: 'Do you trust in Christ as Lord.' 'Stand bravely... and remain faithful to Christ to the end of your life.' 'Shine as a light in the world to the glory of God the Father.' We trust, we stand, we shine – it's about how we *live*.

And it is this key to living well is what ultimately explains why people are still so desperate to get their hands on a bible. We are made in the image of God – and this God has given us the key to how to live in this book. In Christ, he also gives us his presence to enable to us to live like this. And how we need it – Paul is very open about the challenges of being a follower of Jesus. We may not have it as hard as Paul did – but we are still swimming against the tide. People will wonder if we've gone mad, or become a 'bible basher'. But this is where we come back to find sanity – to find wisdom, faith and empowerment.

The bible is truth – but it's not just words, it's life-giving. Maybe today is the time to recommit yourself to investigating what it says. Start with a gospel – Matthew, Mark, Luke or John – and just read it. Soak it up. Let it speak to you, inspire you, reveal the deepest thoughts of your hearts. It's God breathing – can you feel his heartbeat? Amen.