

19th November Peace Church

Linda Clist

Bible Sunday: Have you got an appetite?

Psalm 19 : 7-14

⁷ The law of the Lord is perfect.

It gives us new strength.

The laws of the Lord can be trusted.

They make childish people wise.

⁸ The rules of the Lord are right.

They give joy to our hearts.

The commands of the Lord shine brightly.

They give light to our minds.

⁹ The law that brings respect for the Lord is pure.

It lasts forever.

The directions the Lord gives are true.

All of them are completely right.

¹⁰ They are more priceless than gold.

They have greater value than huge amounts of pure gold.

They are sweeter than honey

that is taken from the honeycomb.

¹¹ I am warned by them.

When I obey them, I am greatly rewarded.

¹² **Can I know my mistakes?**

Forgive my hidden faults.

¹³ Keep me also from the sins I want to commit.

May they not be my master.

Then I will be without blame.

I will not be guilty of any great sin against your law.

¹⁴ Lord, may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart be pleasing in your eyes.

You are my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen!

2 Timothy 3 : 14 - 4 : 5

Paul writes to Timothy:

¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it,

¹⁵ and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that all God's people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

¹ In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living

and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: ² Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. ³ For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. ⁴ They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. ⁵ But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

John 5 : 36-47

Jesus said to the Pharisees: ³⁶ "I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to finish—the very works that I am doing—testify that the Father has sent me. ³⁷ And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, ³⁸ nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. ³⁹ You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you possess eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, ⁴⁰ yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

⁴¹ "I do not accept glory from human beings, ⁴² but I know you. I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts. ⁴³ I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; but if someone else comes in his own name, you will accept him.

⁴⁴ How can you believe, since you accept glory from one another but do not seek the glory that comes from the only God ?

⁴⁵ "But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. ⁴⁶ If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. ⁴⁷ But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?"

I saw an interesting programme when I was back home in the UK ten days ago. There was this group of people who set out to walk hundreds of miles from the south-west of England all the way up to Scotland. They were all really overweight and their doctors had told them they had to get fit. A few days before they got to the end, after one really long, wet walk, they decided to treat themselves to a meal in a pub. And they ordered pies and sausages and chips ... – all the sorts of food that the doctors had told them to give up!

About half-way through the meal, one of them got up and said, "I don't want this any more. I'm not going to eat another chip." And off they went! This was someone who would have wolfed down the lot 4 weeks

earlier! They'd lost their appetite for pie and chips. And they were actually developing an appetite for healthy food...

Have we got an appetite for God's word?!

That's the song we were singing a few minutes ago – thinking of God's Word [---] as if it's food. It's not a bad picture to help us think about things Have we got an appetite for the bible? Do we look forward to hearing it? Do we think it's good for us? Do we find it indigestible? Perhaps it's just not to our taste? Do we want large portions regularly – or just a tiny taste now and then? The content of our readings today are a bit of a mix – some bits are rather nice and easy to swallow – like honey; others are a bit tough – they need a bit of chewing over.... but what they all do really well is to present us with people who have different opinions about the bible, different reactions – different appetites!.... And I don't think much has changed down the years: they're just the sort of reactions that people have today.....

We're going to start with people who actually have no appetite for the bible at all! Look at our reading from Timothy – vv 3 and 4 :

³ *For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.*

⁴ *They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.*

Not everyone wants to hear the truth. People may prefer teachers who will tell them what they want to hear – what their “itching ears” are hoping for. After all, the bible contains some rather unpalatable truths. And it has rules, laws and directions (quoting from Psalm 19)! “I am warned by them” it says... God's word points out our own mistakes and our own faults. Paul talks about the scripture rebuking, correcting, training, getting us ready to work...

It's not the sort of menu that's automatically going to appeal to people, is it?! It would be much easier to be told we can please ourselves, rather than God. It would be much easier to be told that if something feels right to us, it probably is right. That sort of unsound teaching is really easy to take – but it doesn't actually do us any good. It's the spiritual equivalent of a lollipop – it's sweet and attractive – but it doesn't give you any real nourishment and it's actually bad for you - especially if you eat nothing but lollipops!!

Our next group of consumers seem at first sight very different from the first lot. They seem to have a genuine appetite for scripture. They want to read the bible. In fact, they make quite a meal of it! They've done all the courses, read all the books, enjoy discussing all the theories... Here they

are in the reading from John. They're the Pharisees – some of the top religious people in Palestine at the time of Jesus. Unfortunately, they paid as much attention to the rules and ideas of their own teachers as they did to the actual scriptures. And that could distort the way they looked at scripture. They would try to find arguments to support their pet ideas – rather than read with open minds to find ideas..... ‘Religious’ people are always in danger of having a keener appetite for religious trimmings than for the real meat of their faith. It's like someone at a table full of delicious healthy food, who spends most of their time rearranging the tablecloth, lining up the knives and forks, polishing the salt cellar and worrying about what kind of bowl they should put the fruit in.

When Jesus talks to this group of Pharisees, you can just feel his frustration! These people do study the scriptures - sentence by sentence - but they keep missing the point! They are so close to what really matters – and they just don't get it! In fact, in a way, they are TOO interested in the written texts - so interested that they can't be bothered to look around them and see what's happening in front of their very eyes! Here's Jesus doing all the things he's doing – and they can't make the connection between Him and the One they read about in the scriptures....

vv 39-40: ³⁹ *You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you possess eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me,* ⁴⁰ *yet you refuse to come to me to have life.*

It still happens today of course! There are always people who like to read the bible – who like to study it even – who like to discuss different versions and different interpretations – but who refuse to go to Jesus to have life. So the scripture becomes an end in itself, rather than a means to an end – but the bible is actually a means to an end - the end of getting to know JESUS CHRIST better.

And let's take note – even on Bible Sunday - it is *a* means. Jesus makes it clear that yes, the scripture talks about him, but there's other evidence too. The universe God made is one - and God at work in people's lives is another. Jesus talks about “*the very works that I am doing*”. And it's seeing the very works that God is doing in people today, through the Holy Spirit, that often brings people to the bible in the first place.

So these Pharisees aren't relating what they read in scripture to real-life experience. They aren't understanding the real truth. And there's another problem! “*I know you,*” Jesus tells them. “*I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts*” (x2)

Reading scripture is special. It's not just about the head and reading for understanding. It's also about the heart and reading for response.

Without that, the scripture is no more than another ancient text – something we might study like any other literary work. Reading God's Word with love for God in our hearts is a completely different

experience. Think about the difference between reading a personal letter from someone you really love and reading a letter from a stranger printed in the paper. There's *no* comparison!

To go back to our food analogy, it's something like the difference between your absolute favourite food, shared with your favourite person in the whole world in your favourite restaurant - and something ordinary and tasteless that you eat on your own in a Stehcafe!

Well, thank God, we do have someone here in these readings for whom the scriptures are a feast to enjoy, with both heart and head, a man with an appetite for good teaching – and that's Timothy, the young church leader to whom Paul is writing here. And we know that Timothy started off at a great advantage : he was brought up with the scriptures – taught by people in his family – people who loved God and who loved him.

Amongst all the things that we as parents want to do for our children, let's take this REALLY seriously. We may worry about whether we can get them to develop an appetite for green vegetables – how much effort do we put into giving them an appetite for scripture? And believe me, the bible is so much more appealing to children than broccoli will ever be! Even if we're new to the faith and we don't have much bible knowledge, that's fine - we can learn together....

So - Timothy had been given this great start with the scriptures, but even more important, it says "*continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of*". Each individual has to make their own decision about the truth or otherwise of what the bible says – a decision that is often a process. Timothy had become convinced for himself that the scriptures were true. And now Timothy himself was teaching others – and Paul encourages him to teach the word, patiently and carefully, encouraging and correcting without fear or favour. Encouraging and correcting! *Hmmm...* God's word is a source of comfort : it's also a source of challenge. Perhaps we could see it as both sweet and savoury! We need a balanced diet! It's no good only looking for the spiritual equivalent of puddings! We all know that a diet of cakes, pastries and icecream may seem attractive, but wouldn't make us fit for life!

It's fabulous to read uplifting words in scripture about God's love, tenderness and forgiveness. But we need the other dishes too – those with a sharper taste – God's rules and warnings and demands. We do ourselves no favours by trying to reduce the bible to what's sweet and easily-digested. It would be like living on a soft diet of soups and jellies and mousses. We need things to chew on, to crunch on, to help us grow mature as healthy believers.

