18 August 2019: Said Matins with Hymns
The Ninth Sunday after Trinity
Jonah 1, 2 Peter 3:14–end
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So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you…, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand…

+in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

I will begin by confessing that I took that particular verse for my epigraph largely because it makes me laugh. I hope that it also made some of you laugh – it’s hard to tell from the pulpit! – and actually, I don’t think that needs confessing. Those of us who are familiar with the letters of Paul should laugh – because we should recognise that this phrase is true. There are things in the letters of Paul that are hard to understand – lots of things. And any of us who routinely come to Matins, or Evensong, or indeed the Sung Eucharist, will have encountered them, probably frequently.

Recognising the truth of this verse should raise a wry smile. And it should make us wonder: was the writer of the letter chuckling when he wrote it? Did the first community to receive the letter chuckle too, as it was read out when they gathered on Sunday morning to worship?

Our laughter is about the experience we share, of reading Paul’s letters and finding them – to say the least – hard to understand. We share an experience across nineteen centuries – and isn’t that one of the joys of the Church, that people so far away in time and space are friends with whom we can laugh?

However, what I should have confessed is stopping halfway through the verse. We shouldn’t allow the chuckle of recognition to distract us – quite the opposite, it should make us more ready to read on. The verse continues: there are some things in the letters hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.
And that’s what I want to talk about today: what it means to understand the Scriptures. And while the writer of this letter is talking specifically about Paul, I think what he says is true about all the Bible – which is why these verses are worth considering.

The texts he’s talking about, first, are in some sense the word of God; letters in which something about God is revealed. Paul – and by extension, the whole of Scripture – may be hard to understand, but he’s authoritative, worth reading, and worth getting right.

But Paul, and Scripture, are difficult to understand. It’s easy to get it wrong – whether through negligence, weakness or our own deliberate twisting of the meaning to serve our own purposes. It’s easy to misunderstand the Bible because we aren’t always taught to read it well; and however well prepared we are, it’s almost impossible to escape completely from reading through the lens of our own experience; and therefore finding only what we expect to see.

And misreading Scripture – twisting it – leads to our own destruction. It has the potential to be destructive and dangerous – for others and for us. Reading exclusively through the lens of our own experience, looking exclusively for what we want and expect to see, leads us to create God in our own image, God who is no bigger than we are and cares only about what we care about. Misunderstanding Scripture means misunderstanding God: God’s creation, God’s love, God’s will, God’s call. If you don’t believe me, look at the political discourse in America at the moment.

And this leads, I think, to two questions – both of which are important, and either of which could comfortably occupy the remaining time of this sermon, if not several.

First: why should we bother with Scripture at all?

And second: if indeed it is worth reading the Bible, how do we read it rightly?

Why read the Bible at all?

Another sermon – another preacher! – might choose to talk about the doctrine of inspiration, in which we assert that in some mysterious way, the Holy Spirit breathed in and through human beings writing the text of Scripture. Or the historical process whereby scholars, theologians and saints in the first Christian centuries examined Christian texts to discern which is God-breathed Scripture and which merely spiritually edifying writing. Or the joy of tradition, trusting those who have gone before us and leaning on the faith of the Church.
But forgive me if I don’t talk about any of those things and instead answer the first question glibly. It’s worth reading the Bible because it’s the word of God – in which God meets and encounters us.

I think the second question is more interesting – and more important. How do we read Scripture well? If it is worth reading but difficult to read; and if reading it right is important and reading it wrongly destructive – we need to know how to read the Bible.

Again, another sermon – another preacher – might outline the various different ways to read the Bible – and that could fill a number of sermons. The dangerous ways to read – literally, as if every word is an accurate historical record; or conversely, entirely sceptically, as if nothing can possibly have any truth in it.

Or the positive ways to read. Attention to authors and context: the people writing and the experiences of their lives. Who wrote each book? What had shaped their outlook? Who were they writing to, or for? And what kind of thing – what genre – did they think they were writing?

Let’s take our first reading, the first chapter of the short book of Jonah, as an example. Jonah’s categorised among biblical books as a “minor prophet” but it’s clearly very different from the other minor prophets, people like Malachi or Zechariah, whose books are almost entirely addresses from God to God’s people spoken by a prophetic preacher. Jonah, however, is a story – and the more you look at it, the more you realise how well written it is. It’s a story – it’s fiction, structured artistically, its characters well-drawn (if rather caricatured), and its moral as clear as a moral in Dickens, and with just as much basis in historical fact.

We misunderstand Jonah – and we are vulnerable to destructively misuse it – if we think it’s historically true. Instead, what we have is a writer – an inspired writer, but a human one – who writes a story to tell his readers something about the nature of God, of forgiveness, of salvation.

These are positive ways to read: ways to read the Bible that allow us to encounter it for what it is, not for what we expect it to be, and therefore to allow God – the living God, eternal and glorious – to encounter us through it.

But I want to finish by returning to the encounter with the biblical text with which we began – with that shared laughter, shared experience. Because I think that is a way that we can meet and encounter the Bible that helps us to read Scripture right. At the risk of using a metaphor
that even Paul would have rejected as too convoluted: can we encounter the Bible not as a
text, but as a friend?

If we treat the Bible as a friend, we can be readier to meet it on its own terms; to recognise it’s
made – like human beings – in God’s image, and not to remake it in our own. We can
recognise its many moods – storytelling or advice-giving, rejoicing or lament, humour or
warning. We can realise that it tells us the truth and calls us with the voice of God. We can
recognise its essential humanity – but we can also recognise that through it, the light of God
shines. Sometimes cloaked and sometimes hard to define; sometimes clear and beautiful; but
always there somewhere. If the Bible is a friend, not a text, then our encounters with it are
alive and life-giving with the life of Jesus. To whom be the glory both now and to the day of
eternity. Amen.