

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 19th September 2021

What a Lotto ticket is to the gambler, a bookshop is to me. It has a fatal attraction – and even more so if it is a second hand bookshop!

My favourite where I have spent many a happy wet afternoon is in York, and of course, in my University days, I would enjoy an hour in Voltaire and Rousseau, just off Gibson Street in Glasgow.

I like the dusty shelves, the musty fragrance of the volumes, ranged in subject matter all around the walls.

A few years ago when I was lost in searching the shelves of the bookshop in York, I did not realise that I had been in for so long, and the owner came up and offered me a cup of tea.

I started collecting books when I was twelve and I haven't stopped. It was an excruciatingly painful time when I retired and had to move from the Manse in Ayr – I was forced to fill three skips with books. Choosing was virtually impossible, but it had to be done, as my house in Prestwick could not accommodate so many.

Now my study at Coylebank is like a second hand bookshop, and books have overflowed into other rooms in the house: they are piled up on the floor, sitting on either side of my bed on the bedside cabinets, littered over the coffee table in the conservatory. I really ought to inform any intending burglar that I have nothing really worth his coming to get!

O yes, I still hope that someday when turning over the rows of red leather and green board and red board and dust cover, I will unearth something of value! I keep hoping that I might be like the London bookseller who a few years after the First World War went down to see the books in Lamport Hall, a country house in Northamptonshire. Accidentally he came into an old drawing room where there were piles of books among the furniture, covered in dust and eaten by mice. In amongst them he found a rare edition of Shakespeare's "Venus and Adonis" from 1599, which sold for £15,100!

I have a first edition of John Betjeman's "Summoned by Bells" which I purchased a few years ago, and I should really inquire if it is worth anything at all. Watch this space – I may be worth a small fortune!

The truth is that I am loathed to part with a single volume, and I really ought to get in touch with those friends to whom I have lent books and who have never returned them. Richard Heber, the greatest book collector who ever lived, once said that you should have three copies of every book – one to read, one to look at and one to lend. He's the fellow who was a brother of a Bishop in the Church of England who wrote the hymn "From Greenland's icy mountains", and when he died, it was obvious he himself had never been a clergyman, for he left eight houses, each full of books, 158,000 volumes altogether. I have quite a way to go!

Even though I have a Kindle, I love nothing more than the feel of a book in my hands, and if it is an old one, the thought of those who had enjoyed it in years gone by.

Were you to take a glance around my Study, you will see biographies and autobiographies, books of poetry, travel books, theological books, and a whole host of others, and when I am not busy, you will find me with my nose buried in one of them, my imagination fired by the pen of the author.

You can take a book anywhere and a book will take you anywhere.

The Bible too is a library of books – 66 of them in total, the Old Testament written in Hebrew, the New Testament in Greek, coming to us from a culture and a world very different from the one which we inhabit today. In its pages, we find a world of camels and sheep and shepherds and vines.

You and I live in a world of computers and jet planes and great corporations.

The folk who lived in Biblical times were very much the same as the people we live with now.

They knew love and hatred, bitterness and grief. They were acquainted with resentment and jealousy and friction which spoiled family life.

Yet, still for us today, we say that the Bible is the Word of God. In its pages, God speaks to us eternal truths. There is poetry, history, letters, prophecy, all culminating in the advent of Jesus Christ, the Living Word.

As Presbyterians, we call ourselves “people of the Book”. That is why the Bible is reverently carried into the pulpit before worship begins each Sunday morning.

It is on its teaching that the preacher bases his sermon, opening up to the congregation the history of the people who have travelled before them the road upon which they now find themselves.

The Bible, however, does not call us to lead our lives as pale imitations of the past, trying to reproduce in our own times the circumstances and the characters of third century Bibleland.

I love the story of the Minister and the local agnostic who were arguing about the validity of Scripture. The agnostic said, “Well, Minister, how can you read that book and preach from it every Sunday of your life? It is filled with utter nonsense!”

To which the reply was, “Nonsense or not, it is the word of God.”

Contrary to popular opinion, the Bible was never meant to be an object of worship.

What is holy about this Book that we call “holy” is that it directs, by precepts and example, the mind and spirit towards the mind and spirit of God.

In other words, our devotion begins when we close the Bible.

The faith becomes the lively word when it becomes rooted in the hearts and the lives of the believers.

The Bible is not a substitute for science or history or politics or even religion.

It is God speaking to each generation His Word for living, and that is why it is so vital for us to read it assiduously, to examine it, to get behind its words to hear God speaking to us in our day and for our time, to “work out our salvation in fear and trembling.”

Sometimes I have been asked the question, “Do you believe that the Bible has to be read literally, that it is the inerrant word of God?”

And my respectful answer is “No!”

For when that has been done, the Bible has been used throughout history for many evil purposes: to support slavery; to denigrate women; to justify capital punishment; to encourage hostility towards gay people; to foster apartheid.

If you read the Bible literally, you can justify every single one of those prejudices.

I love the Bible; I love Jesus; but I cannot love the vitriol and the hatred that is spewed in His Name because I do not believe that it was dictated by God, word for word.

I love the Bible because the God I see in its pages is revealed supremely in the person of Jesus Christ and I read it and experience it through His eyes alone.

For the Christian man or woman, the book that is our Holy Bible must never be a substitute for belief. It is the beginning of belief, written for our learning and as St Paul says, “...that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.”

Our faith is in a Person, not in a book.

The Revd Fraser R Aitken, Locum Minister