2 Timothy 3:10-17
The Bible and us

Today, we continue our series of sermons on the 3:16s of the Bible. For those who haven't been here for the last couple of weeks, the 3:16s are important because for some co-incidental reason, Chapter 3 Verse 16 of many Bible books contain truths that are at the heart of the Christian faith. John 3:16, 2 Corinthians 3:16, Joshua 3:16 and so on – there's lots of them - and today we are looking at 2 Timothy 3:16, which gives us a really important description of what the Bible actually is and how important it is for our lives

In 2 Timothy 3:16, Paul writes this: "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work."

And off the back of that verse, we are going to be thinking today about what the Bible is and why it is important to us and how we can incorporate the Bible more usefully into our everyday lives.

And the context of what Paul writes here is so important to us: he may have written this 2,000 years ago, but he could have written it yesterday!

We seem to live in what is now being called 'a post-truth age' in which Fake News receives as much of a credible hearing as Truth itself. We seem to live in a consumer age in which so many leaders across the world are seeking power through populism and will shape their political or spiritual pitches to the public according to what they know will be popular and win them power and influence, often at the expense of what may be more wise, or more truthful, or more helpful.

These are difficult days to attempt to proclaim Truth - and the voice of the Church is just one more voice amongst a cacophony of competing opinions.

Paul writes this in verse 13: "Wicked people and imposters will go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived".

And a few verses on, in 2 Timothy 4:3, he writes this: "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."

My goodness me – doesn't that sound so much like the world we live in today as Fake News and the pursuit of populism underpins so much of how we live today: "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."

But as Christians, we want to pursue the truth about God. We want to know who Jesus is and we want to understand what having a relationship with Jesus means for our lives. And we believe that God has given us the Bible as the way of knowing God and coming into a relationship with Jesus.

And the key difference between our approach to the Bible and the populism that has become so rife in our world today is simply this: That, yes, we want to read the Scriptures and be affirmed and comforted, but we also mustn't be afraid to read the Scriptures and find ourselves being challenged by God and having our strongly-held views challenged. And we mustn't be afraid to be changed and transformed by God the more we read the Bible. As Paul writes in Romans 12:2: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect."

We don't just read the Bible to be affirmed in all that we think and do. We also read the Bible to be challenged and changed and transformed. And that's why Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:16 that, "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness…"

The Bible is not some Populist Manifesto. It is God's Word to us, inspiring us to change and be transformed ever closer into the likeness of Christ.

Now Paul starts off this verse by writing, "All scripture is inspired by God…" But what does that actually mean?

Well, let's start off by saying what it doesn't mean!

We don't believe as Christians that the Bible is a record of God's Words literally dictated and written down by human beings. I'm no expert in Islamic Theology but my understanding is this idea is closer to how Muslims understand the Koran. And within the Jewish tradition the Law that was given to Moses was dictated by him as, quite literally, God's Words for humans.

But the Bible is slightly different.

The Bible is comprised of 66 individual books, written by about 70 or more individual people, and it comprises songs and poems and history and laws and jokes and riddles and all sorts of other stuff, written by all these people. And we believe that God was inspiring these people as they wrote and that they were being inspired by their relationship with God but that the words they wrote are very human words.

So the Bible is a book of words written by human beings who were being inspired by God as they wrote.

And it's for that reason that we take the teachings in the Bible extremely seriously and we view it as being created through the power of God and that everything we need to know about God is in the Bible. But, because there is a human element to it, we are not surprised when we find historical errors in it or some contradictions.

And we don't need to take it all literally, because we don't take songs that we like literally, we don't take poems that we read literally, and we don't take metaphors in everyday life literally. If someone says to me, "You're a bull in a china shop", it doesn't mean that I literally a bull or that I am literally in a china shop. It's a metaphor that someone is using to speak a truth about me.

And the Bible is the same: some parts of it are historically, literally true but other parts are metaphor or poems or songs or riddles or jokes and so on…

So the Bible is inspired by God, written in human words and contains everything we need to know about God to have a relationship with Jesus. But it is a messy book. And it's messy because it's a really human book as well as an expression of God.

And the messiness of human life is clearly expressed through the Bible. Think about some of the Biblical stories: there are wars and battles, there's physical violence and rape and murder, there's betrayal, there's human failure and weakness, there are stories about lying to God, running away from God, ignoring God, there are stories about human love and human devotion, there are beautiful stories and ugly stories, there are stories of courage, stories of shame, stories of hope, stories of despair…

The whole of human experience is contained in the Bible - for good and for bad.

And that's what makes it such a wonderful book, because as we read the words of Scripture we see ourselves mirrored in its pages…our own failures, our own weaknesses, our own beauty and our own ugliness, our own courage and our own shame, our own hope and our own despair.

The Bible is a mirror in which we see ourselves reflected before God.

And having seen ourselves in this mirror, and also having read some of the incredible stories in the Bible about how God can use ordinary people to do extraordinary things, we are then inspired to go beyond ourselves; to transcend our limitations and become available to God to be used by him for his extraordinary purposes.

As well as seeing our own fallenness in the Bible, we also see our own potential for what we could be if we submit ourselves to God's Holy Spirit at work within us.

But that means growth and that means change - and we know that both change and growth can be painful for us. And so, as we read the Bible, we may feel uncomfortable and challenged by God beyond what we might be either expecting or hoping for. And that's why, in 2 Timothy 3:16, Paul writes that, "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness…"

We are not reading the Bible to gain head knowledge. We are not reading the Bible to gather historical data about the growth of a religious movement. We are not reading the Bible to get information about God. We read the Bible so that we can be comforted and challenged. We read the Bible so that we can grow in faith and be transformed slowly but surely into the image of Jesus Christ. And that requires God to teach us. That requires God to chastise us when we get it wrong. That requires God to correct us when we are heading off down the wrong path.

And all of that added together, as Paul says here, is training for righteousness. And it can be painful. As I said at the beginning, this is a counter-cultural experience in a world that panders to populism and Fake News. As Paul writes, "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."

But the Bible doesn't offer us the easy way. The Bible is not there just to make us feel good about ourselves or to be some sort of Fortune Cookie that will endorse all our life choices. The Bible provides a real challenge to us and can speak deeply into our souls in the most uncomfortable of ways.

A woman once asked the writer Mark Twain, "Don't you struggle with those bits of the Bible that you don't understand?" He replied: "No, madam. I struggle with those bits of the Bible that I do understand…" And that is so often our own experience if we take seriously God's Word to us…

So you might want to read more of the Bible and deepen your relationship with God. But where do you start? It can be a real challenge to start at the beginning, with Genesis 1 and work your way right through to Revelation 22. It can be done – but it may not be the most fruitful approach to take. So how should we do it? There are many different ways…

Well, if you want to do one book of the Bible to start with, I would suggest reading the Gospel of Mark. It's not too long and it's written in a really accessible way

And get a version of the Bible that is easy to read: maybe the Good News Bible or The Message or the NIV.

Or you can download an App – there are hundreds out there which will give you a reading program for each day that will take maybe 10 or 15 minutes each day: probably a bit of the Old Testament and a bit of the New Testament and a Psalm.

Or you can get a little devotional book from a company like the Bible Reading Fellowship which will give a little passage of Scripture for each day and then a small devotional thought about that passage to take with you into your day.

Or you can follow the Church of England lectionary, which is available in book form or online.

There's loads of different ways of doing this: just talk to me afterwards or email me and we can find the right method for you.

It's not easy – but it really is worth the effort because the more regularly we spend time with the Word of God in the Bible, the more our lives are transformed and the deeper we grow into a relationship with Jesus which, ultimately, is what life is all about.

This week, our Jewish brothers and sisters are celebrating Rosh Hashanah, which is the Jewish New Year; a time of new beginnings. So why not take today as a new beginning for yourself and commit yourself to bringing your faith to life in a more personal way by reading the Bible daily and listening out for God's Word to you?

A relationship with Jesus is a conversation, a dialogue, a two-way thing. We are very good at praying to God, asking him to give us what we want. Let's make sure that we balance that with a desire to listen to God as he speaks to us through the Bible.

It requires effort and, sometimes, can be a real challenge. I remember speaking to the Bishop of Ely once, and he had just preached at a church and, at the end of the service, a disgruntled woman came up to him and said, "Well Bishop, that sermon went right over my head" And his reply? "Madam, then stand on tiptoes".

Hearing God speak to us may well require us to stand on tiptoes and really make the effort to listen for his Word. But if we do that, we will be inwardly transformed, and who knows what God will do in you and through you as you draw closer into a loving relationship with Jesus.