

All Scripture?

Do you have a favourite bible verse? Mine is, as I'm sure you'll have picked up, 1 Corinthians 1:18 – "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Except sometimes, I find I my favourite verse is Psalm 46:1 "God is my refuge and strength", or perhaps Ecclesiastes 3:1 "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens". And so on.

I think we find that different verses of scripture speak to us in different ways at different times. Different times of our day or week – one that is often at the front of my mind on Sunday mornings is Psalm 19:14 "May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer."

And not only different times of the day and week, but different times of our lives as well. Our favourite verses are not the same, because we are all different – we have different personalities, different interests, different backgrounds and different circumstances.

A few years ago, I took a funeral for a relative of a member of the congregation I was serving at. I think it's always a privilege to do that – to be with people in their time of grief, to do my best to comfort them, and to share the hope of everlasting life that Jesus offers.

After this particular funeral, I went along to the gathering afterward, I didn't plan to stay long – I had a cup of tea and a couple of sandwiches, said my goodbyes to the immediate family, and headed for the exit.

I was quietly leaving, a voice boomed out "There's the minister, I've got to talk to him", and this big fellow made his way over to me. He introduced himself as Sam, and he told me he was a farmer. Sam had many views which he was not afraid to share with me. We talked at length about drought and floods and the government and protesters who glue themselves to roads, and a lot of other things besides. And sure enough, having talked about politics – at length – Sam got to religion.

"Genesis 27:11 is enough religion for me" he said, "that's what I base my life on". Does anyone recall Genesis 27:11 off the top of their heads? I didn't... so I took the diplomatic approach and said, "Why is that?"

"Because it says "Esau was a hairy man", and I reckon that's all I need to know. Esau was a hairy man, I'm a hairy man, that's enough for me."

That's an interesting favourite verse isn't it? So later on, I looked it up. Genesis 27:11 "But Jacob said to his mother Rebekah, "Look, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a man of smooth skin."

So I was impressed with Sam's biblical knowledge. And then I got to thinking, what does it mean?

Because there are people who will say that every verse of the bible speaks to the person and character of Jesus Christ. And we can have bible studies where we carefully tease apart verses to find truths about Jesus.

So, for instance, we can look at the shortest verse of the bible, John 11:35, which, you might know, in the King James Version is simply "Jesus wept". And we can tease out from that that Jesus was compassionate and caring for others and that he mourned and the loss of his friend and that in fact he was human.

Except that we can't really do that. Because John 11:35, in isolation, simply tells us that there was a person named Jesus who cried. Everything else we discern from that verse we get from its context. From the context, we know why Jesus is crying, who he is crying for, and all the rest of it.

Knowing all those things from John 11:35 is not wrong, but they're not learned simply from reading John 11:35 in isolation.

Paul writes to Timothy in our reading today, that "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." (3:16-17)

Notice that Paul doesn't say that "Every piece of scripture" or "Every verse of scripture" is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. Instead he says "all scripture" – I like to think of it as "the wholeness of scripture".

We should keep in mind that when Paul wrote this, the scriptures that they had were what we know as the Old Testament, but we hold that what he wrote does apply to the accepted books of the New Testament too.

So, what is it that we can discern from the "Esau was a hairy man" verse? Well, I don't think we can discern all that much from it, besides Esau's hirsutiness unless we put it into context. Into the context of the story of Isaac, Rebekah, Esau and Jacob, the context of the story of Abraham and Isaac, and indeed into the context of the whole of the bible – God's plan for the world.

It follows then, that if context is important, we need to look at what the context is of this verse, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness". Now, as bible verses go, this one is pretty close to being stand alone.

And some certainly are. The ever-popular John 3:16, is a great summary of what we believe, but even that leaves a lot of what believe unsaid.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Is absolutely everything we need in that?

Well, that verse doesn't mention forgiveness, it doesn't mention the need to love God or each other, it doesn't mention the Holy Spirit. And so on.

While it is a great summary of our faith, it doesn't give us all there is. We need the wholeness of scripture to do that.

And in that wholeness, we have two letters written by the apostle Paul, to Timothy. Timothy was from Asia Minor and was the son of a Jewish mother and a Greek father. He became a follower of Jesus, and a companion and assistant to Paul in his missionary journeys. There was a strong bond between them, and in the openings of both letters, Paul regards Timothy as a son.

Both letters were written by Paul to someone he loved as a son, someone he knew well, someone he'd worked with, someone he'd travelled with, and someone he trusted to carry on the mission work he'd begun. To proclaim the good news of Jesus, just as Paul himself had done.

In the second letter, from which we've taken today's reading, Paul is focused on encouraging Timothy to persevere in that work. Keep witnessing faithfully. Be like the persistent widow from our gospel reading. Share the good news and hold fast to the scriptures, and to keep doing that even in the face of opposition and outright suffering.

The Good News Bible's introduction to this letter points out that "Timothy is especially warned about the dangers of becoming involved in "foolish and ignorant arguments" [2 Tim 2:23] that do no good, but only ruin the people who listen to them:". I think that so many people on Facebook, Christian and otherwise, would do really, really, well, to listen to that advice.

The section of this letter that we've heard from today is headed "A final charge to Timothy" in the NIV translation. This is not Paul's afterthought, but it's serious stuff: There's no doubt that this is important, not only for Timothy, but also for all of us who follow in Timothy's metaphorical footsteps 2000 odd years later.

Our reading began at verse 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, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."

Paul says that the scriptures – which in Paul's context was specifically the Old Testament – are important for Timothy's understanding of his faith in Jesus.

Sometimes people suggest that we shouldn't worry much about the Old Testament, because we have the New Testament now, and that's all about Jesus.

But the Old Testament is all about Jesus too: Not by name, but by his character. The Old Testament tells us about Jesus and what he will do, again not by name, and I think not really individually in every verse, because I think Esau being a hairy man is neither here nor there, but the whole of the Old Testament does.

Psalms 23:1, which I'm sure will be many people's favourite verse, tells us that "The Lord is my shepherd", and then, in John's gospel, Jesus confirms who he is by declaring "I am the good shepherd".

Here in his letter to Timothy, Paul says it clearly, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

If we know our scriptures, we are better equipped to follow Jesus and to do the work he calls us to. We don't need to study the bible to be followers of Jesus, but it helps. And it's useful, and it's interesting, and it can even be joyful besides.

But studying the scriptures is not enough – we need to respond.

Paul tells us at the opening of Chapter 4 when he writes "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: Preach the word;"

This is the heart of what Paul wants Timothy to do. And what he wants us to do.

"Preach the word" is a strong term, which might be daunting... but we can also translate it (as the NRSV does) as 'proclaim the message', or perhaps even more simply as, 'share the good news' or 'share the message'.

And if you think about it, as you become more and more familiar with the scriptures and the more you get to know Jesus, you are more able to proclaim the message. You know more, you can relate more. We can try different approaches.

Sharing the message probably isn't, for you, standing on a street corner wearing a sandwich board, but it could be, I guess. And it may not be approaching strangers in the aisles of woollies or Coles, but again it could be. It may not be sharing your faith with your family and friends over Christmas dinner – but it might be. And it may not be posting memes on Facebook or passing on chain emails – but... no I'm pretty sure that's not effective.

But there are many ways we can share our faith, and many opportunities to share it. And the more we know, the more options we have. And if one approach doesn't work, that's okay, try something else – Paul says "be prepared in season and out of season...with great patience..." (4:2)

Be patient. Don't give up. Try again. Again, be like the persistent widow from the parable.

And then Paul warns Timothy "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. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths." (4:3-4)

Last week I talked about Jeremiah's letter to the Jewish exiles in Babylon, where the exiles were listening to fortune tellers and false prophets who were simply telling them what they wanted to hear. We need to be relying on the scriptures so we don't go in the wrong direction. If we're relying simply on what sounds good or sounds right to us, or simply benefits us financially or socially, it is easy to be led astray. When we meet together on a Sunday morning, I don't just tell you what I think about stuff. Instead, we have the bible read out, so you can listen to that and then think about what I say in terms of does it fit in with what our bible reading was.

And as well as that, we provide the readings in our printed order of service and put them up on the screen. Check that the reader isn't misleading you. Check that I'm not misleading you. If you want, bring your own bible from home – now it might be a different translation, but that's okay... think about why the words might be a bit different, but mostly focus on if what I say – or whoever's preaching says – to check that it fits in with what the bible says.

Because there's a danger in just taking what someone says simply at face value, even if it sounds good. Don't trust without checking.

Our reading today concludes at verse 5 of chapter 4 – and to me it really does read as fatherly advice "But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry."

All this stuff is good. But we need to keep our heads – be sensible – and we need to endure suffering, because it won't always be easy – our Christian journey is not always easy and sometimes we will suffer. But despite that, Paul urges Timothy to do the work of an evangelist – share the good news of Jesus. How? Well there's lots of ways – lots of ways to serve and lots of ways to share. But do it. Carry out your ministry fully.

Go and share the good news. Go and make disciples. Go and reach out to the outsiders and the loney. Go and care for people in need. Go and love God and love your neighbours as yourself.

Amen.