

Luke 4: 14-21

Whenever I come across that passage from Luke's gospel my heart warms. It tells us of Jesus back in his home town, with his own family, with friends he grew up with. There in the synagogue where he would have learned the scriptures. See it in your mind's eye – he is handed the scroll and finds the place and reads from it.

Luke goes on to recount the passage he read, and Jesus' commentary on it. This is a passage set for the lectionary today, and most preachers who choose this passage will reflect on Jesus' words. But I am going to be different.

I want to reflect on Jesus reading scripture, and on scripture as whole, as we have it today. I am fairly sure that we have all got our own copy of the Bible. That makes us a lot more fortunate than people in Jesus' day who had to listen to it being read on the Sabbath.

We know that year in year out the Bible is a bestseller and we are all familiar with the Bible - or are we? So much in it. 66 books, 1600 years in the writing. A book of people's developing ideas about God as he revealed himself.

That makes it a special book, a holy book. If you have a tatty old copy, do you feel you cannot put it out for recycling? We all recognise it as a powerful book. God has spoken to us, and this is our manual, not for one life, but for two lives – this one and our preparation for the one to come.

Wouldn't it be comfortable if we had a perfect Bible, with no problems, that gave us an immediate answer to all our questions? But we know it is not that simple. Sometimes it seems more like the impenetrable instructions written by Chinese for the electronic equipment we buy!

The Bible no doubt has errors of fact and copying errors. Then there is the problem of understanding things from the past, when people led very different lives. Almost everyone lived close to the land and wars were fought with spears and swords. I remember when I was young they kept updating Scouting for Boys, the original manual written by BP. Eventually they decided that they were getting so far away from what he had written that they stopped updating and left it alone so that it rapidly became a historical oddity rather than a handbook.

God does not update the words of the Bible. So there are difficulties for us in using our Bible but it remains the living word of God, living. The words on the page may be dead but the Spirit is alive. It is our supreme authority as a church – listen again to the words from the Statement concerning the nature, faith and order of the URC: *"The highest authority for what we believe and do is God's Word in the Bible alive for his people today through the help of Spirit."*

Without the Bible we would have a very poor, thin religion although the Bible itself is not the source of life. That source is Jesus, who by his Holy Spirit brings the pages alive in our hearts.

We often say at the end of a reading in church “This is the Word of the Lord”, even if sometimes we feel a bit uncomfortable saying it, when we are thinking that surely God would not put it quite like that? But if we believe that Scripture really is from God, inspired by God, then despite our reservations about bits here or there, what are we as Christians doing with it?

I suppose there are twin dangers with this difficult book – either we give it up as too hard, or we stop thinking about what we are reading because the words are so familiar.

We read the Bible for food. We read it as part of our conversation with God. This is one way He speaks to us. And he cannot do it if our Bibles are sitting unopened on the bookshelves.

You may have an inner glow now, because you do read your Bible daily. Perhaps with Bible reading notes. Or you may be thinking that you have managed all these years without doing so, and you hear it read each week in church anyway.

Could I be really bold and suggest that without the Bible as daily food our effectiveness as Christians is halved?

Jesus knew his scriptures and famous Christians down the ages knew their Bibles. I pray that we too would all continue to grow in our knowledge of them. May I end with a final quote – *“no one ever graduates from Bible study until he meets its author face to face.”*