

Sermon for Sunday, February 15, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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Sometimes
you read something
that totally shifts the way you think.
That happened to me
this week.

As you know
the book that is being read and discussed on Tuesday nights
is called “Being Christian”
and it’s by the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams.
It’s just a small book: four chapters,
baptism, bible, Eucharist
and prayer.
But in those few pages
there is so much.

This week we read the chapter on the bible.
Williams began it by reminding us
that for most of the history of the Christian church
people have listened to the bible
rather than read it for themselves.
We’re so used to having books readily available
that we forget that.

For the first three quarters of the history of the Christian church
hardly anyone actually had a copy of the bible.
Until the printing press was invented
the only way you could have a bible
is if someone copied it out by hand,
which meant the only people who had bibles
were monasteries,
where they were copied,
and those people who were wealthy enough to commission a copy.
Even most churches didn’t have one.

The invention of the printing press ,
and particularly the one invented by Gutenberg
in the middle of the fifteenth century
made it possible to print multiple copies of books
at a relatively affordable price;
but even then,
most people didn't have a bible.
It was a big deal
when King Henry the Eighth ordered
that a bible be put in each church
in the early sixteenth century.
They were typically chained in place
so that no one could steal them,
But what mattered
was that anyone who wanted
could come and read it for themselves.

But of course that assumed
that they could read.
Remember
it wasn't really until the last couple of hundred years ago
that education
became something that most people had access to.
Until then
you only learned to read
if you were a child of highly born
or extremely wealthy people,
or if it was required for your business.

So for most of the history of Christianity
people's access to the bible
was limited.
And so what they had to do
was to listen
as the bible
was read out to them.
And they listened carefully,
and memorized what they heard,
because these words were limited
and precious.

We're lucky, by comparison.
Most of us
have the opportunity to learn to read
and bibles are published in a huge range of formats
including big elegant hardbacks
and cheap mass market paperbacks.
And thanks to computers
we can print sections of scripture
whenever we want.

But of course, you all know the proverb,
familiarity breeds contempt.
Sometimes
the very fact that bibles are so accessible
means that we forget what an incredible gift they are.
They sit all too easily on our bookshelves
instead of in our hearts.
And sometimes
we forget to listen.

That's what I had forgotten to do, until I read that little chapter in the book.

And so today
I'm going to ask you to listen
as I read the psalm portion set for today.
It is the first six verses
of Psalm 50.
Don't follow along in your bulletin;
just listen.

The LORD, the God of gods, has spoken;
he has called the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting.
Out of Zion, perfect in its beauty,
God reveals himself in glory.
Our God will come and will not keep silence;
before him there is a consuming flame,
and round about him a raging storm.
He calls the heavens and the earth from above
to witness the judgment of his people.

"Gather before me my loyal followers,
those who have made a covenant with me
and sealed it with sacrifice."
Let the heavens declare the rightness of his cause;
for God himself is judge.

I wonder what you heard?
For many of us,
it may be the last line that sticks in our heads,
that God is judge.
But let's not lose
the rest of the psalm.

One of the first things I noticed
is that unlike many of the psalms
this one
doesn't read like a prayer.
It tells us about God
rather than being addressed to God,
But if you listen carefully
this isn't just someone's theoretical discussion of God.
It's someone remembering
the stories they've heard about God,
so that they can make sense
of what they hear God saying to them now.

And so it begins
The LORD, the God of gods, has spoken;
he has called the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting.

And the psalmist
takes us back to the beginning of creation,
when everything was formless and void
and darkness covered
the face of the deep.
And God said, "Let there be light."
And there was light.

And God said, 'Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.' And it was so.

And there was
the sun and the moon.
God calling the earth
from the rising of the sun
to its setting.

And then we hear
 Out of Zion, perfect in its beauty,
 God reveals himself in glory.

Zion, the traditional name for the city of God, Jerusalem,
with the temple at its very center.

And in the temple,
the sanctuary,
and in the sanctuary
the holy of holies,
and there God
was known to be present.
There
God was revealed.
This was where you went
to find God.

And it echoes forward.
This is where Zechariah went
to serve God,
this is where it was announced to him
that he would have a son,
John,
John the baptist,
the one who prepared the way
of our Lord.

And the echoes continue
through the book of Revelation,
where it talks about
the city of God

which has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb.

And the next verse,
Our God will come and will not keep silence;
before him there is a consuming flame,
and round about him a raging storm.

And we remember Moses,
Moses who met God in a burning bush
and met God again
on the mountain called Sinai,
when there was thunder and lightning, and a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. And as the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder.
And in the thunder
God gave Moses
the Ten Commandments.

But as we listen
we also remember those words
from the letter to the Hebrews:
You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant...

We hear the word of law and the words of judgement
but we also hear within them
the invitation
to come to God
through Jesus Christ,
to come to a great celebration
where God will see us

in his precious Son,
and welcome us
as his beloved heirs.

Back to the psalm,
He calls the heavens and the earth from above
to witness the judgment of his people.
"Gather before me my loyal followers,
those who have made a covenant with me
and sealed it with sacrifice."

When Moses was done with talking with God
he came down the mountain
and the people covenanted with God
to obey his commandments.

But as we listen
we hear too
the story of the new covenant
with Jesus at its heart
and the sacrifice he made
so that we would no longer be bound in a system of ritual sacrifice,
and the gift he made
of his own blood,
the perfect offering
not only for our sins
but for the whole world.

And so we come to those final words,
Let the heavens declare the rightness of his cause;
for God himself is judge.

And as we listen
we hear
of a God who is judge,
the one before whom
we will be called to account,
and we hear our own fears
of being judged,
but we also hear

the echoes
of Jesus Christ
who makes us holy.

Listening to our psalm
we hear the whole sweep
of the story of our faith
caught up in its words,
from creation till the end of time,
and we find ourselves within it,
called to account,
yes, but also blessed with the grace
of God in Christ,
who invites us to follow him
with our hearts and minds and souls and strength,
with all of our being,
and blesses
us with his love.