

Today we are celebrating Bible Sunday.

And in our gospel reading we hear Simon Peter saying to Jesus,
“Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life”.

In the next service we have invited a number of people, young and older, to share a part of the Bible that gives them life.

We will ask them to tell us their favourite passage from scripture - something from which they might take encouragement - and then to tell us why that part of the Bible is important to them.

I’m looking forward to it!

But as we gather here right now I wondered if we might reflect for a moment on Simon Peter’s words from our gospel this morning and what prompted them.

Jesus has been teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum

He has told those gathered there,

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

And then he goes on to say,

“Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.”

Now, all of this causes some consternation in the minds of many of his listeners.

They debate amongst themselves how it might be possible for Jesus to give them his flesh to eat.

And I guess if we slow down for a moment and hear those words at their face value it's not wildly surprising that people might be disturbed.

“Eat his flesh? Drink his blood?”

It sounds like cannibalism.

And detractors of the Jesus movement used to level just that charge at the early church to disparage it in the eyes of the wider world.

And now even some of Jesus’ disciples find this a bridge too far,

too much to get their heads around - this notion of eating Jesus’ flesh and drinking his blood -

and so they leave, unable to follow Jesus any longer.

Perhaps they have been pushed over the edge of belief or understanding,
or beyond the bounds of their notions of common decency and good taste,
or maybe it's something else...
In any event, they leave.

And Jesus, noticing their departure, asks the twelve, the inner circle, if they too wish to leave.

And it is then that Simon Peter says,

“Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life”.

And perhaps we can relate to that.

Perhaps this episode from the Gospel of John sums up something of our own experience of the Bible.

There is much in the Bible that we might find bewildering, disturbing, offensive, even.

There is violence - slaughter and genocide.

There is deceit, division, scheming self-interest, rape, incest, torture, murder,
some of which is apparently done in the name of God,
many things which we struggle to get our heads around.

Yet, we also want to say that it holds the words of life.

And in all of this the Bible encompasses and reflects back to us the entirety of human experience.

Everything that human beings can do to each other and to the world can be found in the Bible.

But what it also does is show us and call us to see the movement of God in the midst of all of that.

Now, I want to be very clear in saying that I don't believe that any of the violence or cruelty or exploitation that we see or hear mirrored back to us in the pages of the Bible is somehow God-ordered or God-ordained.

I think human beings can take the credit for that.

What the Bible also shows us, though, is the redeeming passion and purpose of God,
the redeeming passion and purpose of God calling us into life again and again in
the midst of death and misery, violence, grief and despair.

To be redeemed is to be freed,

bought back, brought back, from slavery and debt

bought back, brought back, from slavery to the things that possess us and the things that oppress us.

And it is this redeeming passion and purpose that is the Word of God spoken to us, speaking to us, in the pages of the Bible.

The Word of God is the word of life,

the word of freedom,

the word of love,

the word of forgiveness,

the word of compassion,

the word of mercy

and the word of judgement.

But every word of judgement is predicated on God's prior word of life and love.

And that word of life and love is spoken most clearly in Jesus, whom we know as *the Word made flesh*,

the living embodiment of God's word of life to us.

This is why we value the Bible.

This is why we speak of it as "The Word of God" -

because it tells us the stories of our lives,

the stories of human experience,

calling us all the while to see and hear and experience the power and presence of God in those stories,

the power and presence of God that *redeems* those stories,

redeems *our* stories with the promise and the power of life and love and freedom and mercy and compassion and forgiveness and judgement... and life and love and freedom and mercy and compassion and forgiveness.