

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. 2 Timothy 2.15.

This 2nd Sunday in Advent is traditionally known as 'Bible Sunday', because the Collect in the BCP famously prays:

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them ...

And so I like to take this opportunity to encourage you to read your Bibles more, because it has to be said that most Christians are pretty ignorant of what the Bible actually says. Muslims who know their Koran by heart put us to shame. As you know, we have been working our way through 2 *Tim*, and, as it happens, the next passage is 2.14-19, and, if you believe in coincidence, (which I don't) that passage has v15 which speaks of our 'rightly dividing the word of truth'.

I think we all know that it is all too easy for people '*wrongly* to divide the word of truth'. You can prove anything you like from the Bible. Doesn't Ps137.9 tell us to take our little ones and dash them against a rock? Didn't Jesus himself tell us in *Lk*14.26 that we must *hate* our father and mother, our wives and children, if we want to be his disciples? I think you know me well enough now to realise that no-one takes the Bible as God's Word more seriously. But those people who claim to take the Bible absolutely *literally*, do they actually take their children and dash them against a stone? And do they actually hate their mothers and fathers, wives and children? After all, isn't that the *literal* meaning?

Of course, even the literalists say, 'Ah yes, but you've got to see these words in their *context*. You've got to compare

them with *other* passages in the Bible, say, about *honouring* your father your and mother, and about the danger of causing these little ones to sin. In other words, we must 'rightly divide the Word of truth'. Any barrack-room lawyer can quote verses of the Bible to prove some crazy point or to make fun of the Bible. It should be remembered that the policy of *apartheid* was derived from the Bible. Don't forget that the devil himself can quote scripture. Isn't that what he did to Jesus when he was tempted in the wilderness for 40 days? Turn to p967, to *Matt4.5f*... But Jesus uses scripture back, v7...

So, there's clearly a right way and a wrong way to read scripture. The obvious *wrong* way is taking passages *out* of context. The old saying is true, 'a text without a context is a pretext'. And this world *heresy* is from a Gk word which means 'to choose', ie picking and choosing what you want. That's precisely what the devil was doing with Jesus. It's what those people were doing in Ephesus, 2,000 years ago. If we return to p1196, to 2 *Tim* 2.17 we meet Hymenaeus and Philetus who are spreading some strange view about the Resurrection. How are they doing it? By selective use of Bible verses taken out of context, vv17-18... But Paul tells timid Timothy to stick to the Bible; look at the context, and compare it always with the rest of the Bible. Look at the 'whole counsel of God' (*Acts* 20.27). This is why it is so important for you to read your Bible every day; to *soak* yourself in it. If you read it every day, year after year, you will eventually read the whole lot, and be able to see it as a whole, rather than as isolated texts out of context.

And we have to ask ourselves, What is my *motive* for reading the Bible? Is it to prove a point, as some barrack-room lawyer, or is humbly to learn God's character and will? I believe that *all* scripture is essentially about Jesus Christ. The whole Bible points to Christ, because, after all, isn't Christ God's very Word made flesh? Therefore our reading of scripture should be Christ-honouring, not God-mocking. When you come to Church, I don't want you to come just to 'feel' vaguely religious and, if you're lucky, to have some hair-tingling encounter with the divine. I want you to meet the real, powerful God. And we can know him *specifically* in this person Jesus Christ. And to do *that*, you need to read the whole of the Bible. So start reading!

But read the Bible to honour Christ, not to construct some weird theory. Remember recently I was telling the children about the Centurion who begged Jesus to heal his servant. Did you know that they were gay? Shocked? That's what the gay lobby argue. It's nowhere in the text, but it *must* be so, because no Roman officer would be that bothered about a mere servant. Talk about seeing what we want to see!

Do you recall a recent tragic case where a mother gave birth to a perfectly healthy child, but she subsequently bled to death because, as a Jehovah's Witness, she refused a blood transfusion? It's the sort of thing that gives 'religion' a bad name, but it's worth seeing how the JWs derive this belief from scripture. It all hangs on the interpretation of the words, 'abstain from blood'. Come with me to p1110, *Acts* 15, specifically v20, and v29... But is that what is *really* being

said here? A text without a context is a pretext. So what *is* the context? This is the decision of the Council of Jerusalem. The issue is *not* whether they should have blood transfusions, but whether Jesus is just for Jews, or for Gentiles as well. It's a hugely important issue with implications for the whole world. It is so important that it goes right back to *Acts* 10 where Peter has his vision of the clean and unclean animals, and then Cornelius (*another* Roman centurion!) visits him. The Church was deeply divided about this: are the *Gentiles* to be included in Christ's saving work? The leaders meet in Jerusalem in ch15, and they decide, Yes, that *is* God's will, v19... The only condition is that the Gentiles observe the Jewish dietary regulations, ie *kosher* meat, v20... Kosher meat is meat without the blood, as *Gen*9.4 commands. The blood contains the life which belongs to God. So this ruling for the Gentiles is about kosher meat, not blood transfusions! So, 'abstain from blood' doesn't mean 'Don't have blood transfusions', but 'Gentiles can come to Jesus but they must abstain from meat with the blood still in it'. Let's read *Acts* 15.12-20 in context... How sad that a woman had to bleed to death because they did not rightly divide the word of truth.

You regular Bible readers, keep at it. Those of you who *don't* read your Bibles, please start. Scripture Union, eg, give helps. Read the Bible humbly to learn Christ; rightly divide the word of truth, giving him all the glory. And the funny thing is that once you start, you get hooked. The more you read, the more you *want* to read, because you are on the most exciting of all journeys, into the mind of God himself.