

Sermon for Bible Sunday 2022

Lord, we thank you for your Word, for your Wisdom and for your People of the Bible. Open the ears of our hearts, that through them, we may hear your message to us today. Amen.

Today is Bible Sunday, when we celebrate the vital role that the Holy Scriptures have played in the life of the church ever since Jesus sent his disciples to proclaim the gospel to the nations.

But we also celebrate the vital role that the people of the Bible continue to play in our lives. They influence and inspire us, they even define the core of our mission. Jesus reads from the book of Isaiah in the temple, and the words ring as mission: to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom to the captives and the blind, to set the oppressed free. Today, we, as his followers, also seek to alleviate poverty, fight against oppression, bring freedom to those who feel captive of their life conditions, addictions, or illnesses. All of this work that we do comes from the message we hear in Scripture.

The people of the Bible encourage us in persevering and keeping the faith. In his letter to the Romans, Paul says 'Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope'. He reminds us that endurance and encouragement are given by God, so that we may think like Jesus did, support each other in the faith, glorify God and build His kingdom.

The people of the Bible can speak to us even more directly. One supporter of The Bible Society says this:

I did not know how important the book of Ruth was in my life until I was sat on the floor of a refugee's shack in the Bekah Valley speaking with a young widow who had to live through tragedy and disaster and was now scraping a living by harvesting grapes for a local farmer.

Scripture spoke to this man as the real world came colliding with what he had read in the Bible. And this is only one example amongst a thousand others. Ruth is one of the many, many people of the Bible who speak to us today, through the ages.

So I wonder... Is there in your life a character from the Bible that continues to inspire you, encourage you or speak to you in a special way?

It could be a mighty prophet or a humble character that does not get many mentions in sermons. It could be Jesus himself or one of his disciples... Just take a few seconds to bring to mind that special character...

Often, the people of the Bible who spring to our minds are important or well-known characters. But today, I would like to highlight a character who was highly influential and yet barely gets any mention at all. My hope is that her story will give you an appetite today to open your bible afresh and go fishing for those extraordinary people who rarely get mentioned and yet really matter.

My character is called Huldah. Who on earth is she?! She is a prophet who gets a tiny mention in the second Book of Kings and the second Book of Chronicles. In contrast to Jeremiah and Zephaniah, two of her contemporaries, she has no book recording her ministry, like most women in the Bible it has to be said.

But she matters. She is a woman approached by a king at a time of crisis. The king is Josiah, King of Judah, the great reforming king of the 7th century BC (640 to 609 BC). The king wants the temple of Jerusalem to be repaired, and one day, in a dusty corner, forgotten in decades of pagan rule, an ancient book is found. The book of the law of Moses, chapters from Deuteronomy. It speaks of terrible judgement coming on the people because they have worshipped idols, done horrible human sacrifices and desecrated holy places. Josiah reads the book and he's shocked! 'Great is the Lord's anger that burns against us because of those who have gone before us!' he cries out.

He wants to know the meaning of the book for himself, and for the people, and for all of Judah. He needs the wisdom of a prophet. So he sends his officials to get some answers. And his men go straight to Huldah. Without discussion. She has a backstory, a recognized prophetic ministry, perhaps established over years. She is married to the keeper of the royal wardrobe, and Josiah has probably known of her all his life. In a crisis, you do not turn to someone without knowing and trusting them. Huldah's wisdom matters.

She speaks with authority, using the prophetic phrase: 'This is what the Lord says.' And the message from God is: 'I am going to bring disaster on this place and its people, but because you, king Josiah, humbled yourself before the Lord, you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place.' In her authority, Huldah stands with mighty prophets like Elijah, Jeremiah and Zephaniah and all who speak not to flatter kings, but to tell the truth of God. Huldah's courage matters.

In response, Josiah seeks God, showing humility and penitence. He acts immediately and reads the book to the people, he renews the covenant with God. He destroys the idols and removes the wizards and the false priests. He reinstates the festival of Passover, where the people remember and give thanks to God for his faithfulness. Together, they remember Exodus. In part, Huldah's words have started this great reformation. Huldah matters.

She mattered then, and she matters now. In the 'fake news' era, she demonstrates truth-telling, even if the truth is hard to take in. She takes a risk, and she represents trust in God. Huldah matters to those who feel insignificant, pushed to the sidelines, and she reminds us that you don't need a book all about you to be used by God.

Huldah is brave, wise, truthful, honest. A powerful prophet, guiding a great king. God worked through her, a theologian, a prophet. She mattered then, and she matters now.

And so I wonder... What other people of the Bible will you discover this week and in the weeks to come who mattered then and still matter today? Who will you rediscover that you had forgotten? Who do you hope to find in the captivating pages of your bible?

Happy reading!

Amen.