

**Bible Sunday**  
**19 July 2015**  
**St. Paul's, Milford: 8:00 and 9:30**

Last week we celebrated Sea Sunday and I must say I was astonished at the number of people here who had such strong connections with the sea. Some had family links with the Navy. Others had been on a cruise, loved the sea, or perhaps enjoyed the music of the sea.

I said that the sea can become an obsession. If so I'm guilty of that. But today I want to introduce another obsession – railways. If you can't go by ship the next best thing is to go by rail. We recently spent three months in Europe. We have great memories of trains in France, Germany and the Netherlands. Fast smooth rail transport, trains travelling about 300 km/h, Paris to Provence in under 2 hours.

One of the things that makes high speed rail travel possible is the gauge – the distance between the rails. I guess the wider the gauge is the safer it is to travel at high speed.

In Australia the various states used different gauges - some 5'3", some 3'6", others 4'8½". That, of course, made it very difficult to establish a nation-wide rail system.

Even today:

Victoria and parts of SA use 5'3". 4000 kms.

NSW and Interstate routes use 4'8½". 18,000 kms.

Qld, WA, Tas and parts of SA use a very narrow 3'6". 15,000 km. And so do we.

But most of the sugar cane rails in Queensland use a gauge of only 2'.

In North America the railroad gauge is 4 feet, 8½ inches. A strange number when you think of it.

The question arises: Why was that gauge used?

The answer seems to be because that's how railroads were built in England and English expatriates designed the American railroads.

But why did the English build them like that?

Because the first rail lines were built by the same people who built the pre-railroad tramways and they were using the tools and jigs that had been used to build carts and covered wagons.

OK. Why did the wagons have that particular odd wheel spacing?

Well, that was the space between the ruts in the English roads, ingrained through centuries of use.

And the ruts in the roads?

Roman chariots formed the initial ruts, which everyone else had to match to avoid destroying their wagon wheels. Since the chariots were made for imperial Rome their wheel spacing was standardised.

So, the argument is that the standard railroad gauge of 4 feet, 8½ inches is derived from the original specifications for an imperial Roman war chariot and they were made just wide enough to accommodate the backsides of two war horses.

At one level this story is laughable – so much for civilisation’s supposed advances and innovation. But what if we looked at the story in a different way? What if we saw it as wonderful?

In a way it’s good that the only progress we make is through building on the accomplishments and insights of others. To be sure, when NASA wheels its latest rocket boosters onto the launch pad rails they’re the width of a horse’s backside.

But what does that matter? Surely the point is that we cannot do anything without reference to what has gone before. We take the old knowledge and apply it to the new context.

As Sir Isaac Newton, father of modern physics, once said: *“If I have seen further it is only by standing on the shoulders of giants.”* Standing on the shoulders of giants. Wonderful words. Building on the foundations laid by others. Honouring and respecting the work others have done and then adding to it, refining it. That’s the basis of most academic research in the university. Standing on the shoulders of giants.

Oddly enough, it’s this same sentiment that Paul seems to be reminding Timothy of in our New Testament reading today.

Paul says: *“Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it.”*

Tradition is much more meaningful if we know where it comes from.

You know what they say about Anglicans?

Just think of our new chapel arrangements!

Do something once and they hate it.

Do it twice and they don’t mind it.

Do it three times and it’s a cherished tradition.

Our rituals in church might seem quaint and old-fashioned until we bother to take the time to trace their ancestry; then they can come alive in new and exciting ways. Unfortunately, tradition seems more often to be regarded in a negative light. For example, the phrase, “We’ve always done it this way” conjures up images of people who blindly and unthinkingly do the same things over and over and over again.

The passage we have today from Paul's 2nd letter to Timothy is one of the most powerful we can imagine. We need to study it very closely.

We're living in the midst of turbulent times in the church. The world is changing at a faster pace than at any other time in human history and we often struggle to make sense of it. We know that the Anglican Church has to adapt to survive. We often hear suggestions that the church needs something radical to shake it up, such as radical new liturgies or some radical new thinking. We hear it in church and we hear it in the world of business – phrases such as 'radical departure'.

But what does 'radical' really mean? We can easily forget that it means “getting back to our roots”. So a radical departure, in a sense, becomes a paradox. If it is to be “radical” it's anything but a departure from; in fact, it's a return to.

What is it that Paul, if he were writing to us, instead of Timothy, might be saying that we need to return to? Well, to start off, he'd probably be posting a message on Facebook or at the very least sending an email. Old knowledge; new context.

First, he would surely reiterate what he said to Timothy, that: “*all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness.*” And then he would add, “but notice that I said ‘inspired by God’ and not ‘the literal word of God’, so don't forget to make use of the intelligence and powers of reason that God gave you to apply the essence of the gospel to today's situation”. Notice too that he says ‘Scripture *is useful*’. He doesn't say every word that's uttered is the last word on the subject. Use reason. Use tradition. Use common sense. Put the written words in context. The Anglican Church prides itself on what is called the balance of Scripture Tradition Reason. It's been likened to a three-legged stool. Take one leg away and the stool collapses.

If you look at the Church's Catechism you'll find some very useful pointers. The Catechism? I hear you say. Yes, we do have one: right at the back of the NZPB. Turn to page 930. The part that relates to the Bible.

Look in particular at the answers to Q 27 and 28.

Then turn to Q 63 and 64. You'll find here that as Anglicans we don't seal ourselves off in a bubble, isolated from the world of science and reason. We use our God-given gifts of reason, intelligence and inquiry to broaden our understanding of the world; the world God placed us on.

Let me give you a rather tired old story that hopefully makes a point. It goes like this. A man was struggling with life; he didn't know what to do next. Not exactly desperate, but looking for a bit of guidance. He turns to his friend who tells him, not very helpfully, that the answer's in the Bible. Just open it and read what it says and do it! So the man grabs his Bible, shuts his eyes and places his finger on the page. And what does he read?

*'Falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out'.*

It's true, Acts 1:18, and it relates to Judas. But not very helpful. He repeats the procedure. This time: *'Go and do likewise!'*  
Luke 10:37. The closing command in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Most of us need help when we read the Bible. Don't expect to pick it up, turn to the beginning and start reading. You'll get very tired of that! You wouldn't do that with the newspaper; you wouldn't use the telephone directory or the dictionary like that. Most of us need help. Many use a commentary. Others use Bible reading notes. The Scripture Union. The Bible Reading Fellowship. They suggest a passage each day and then provide some commentary, words of explanation, what it means and what it means for us. A much more intelligent and enjoyable way to use the Bible. Maybe then look at what the Bible is and I've tried to say something about this in the newsletter. The Bible, the word means 'the books', the library, is a collection of many different kinds of books and we need to see it that way.

Second, he would reinforce what he said to Timothy: *"For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires."* And then he would add: "And just look at the church now. People going to church expecting to be entertained and wanting the preacher to make them feel good about themselves as if church was just a spa for the soul."

Faced with enormous challenges it's tempting for us in the church to market our services and programmes as if they're consumer products or self-help accessories to complement our busy lifestyle choices.

It's tempting for us not to demand too much of people.

Tempting for us to make church as convenient as possible.

Tempting for us to collude with a culture that flits like a butterfly from one shiny thing to another.

Tempting for us to pander to the myth of instant gratification.

There is a cost associated with church membership. Harder still when we recognise that we are a minority culture. Most people don't go to church; most people don't read the Bible. But is the world a happier place? I doubt it. Take a look at Q 68. How is the Christian life possible? Following Christ is demanding and costly, but Christians have the support of their brothers and sisters in Christ and are strengthened and encouraged by God's grace.

We need one another. And we need resources in order to deepen our understanding of the faith. A sermon, lasting 10-15 minutes, can only do so much. It's related to the liturgy (or should be). It's not a lecture; it's not a course instruction. It doesn't allow for dialogue, for questions and answers, for vigorous debate. It may inspire; it may sow a seed; it may encourage debate. At the Eucharist we break bread. But have you ever thought that we also break the word, break open the word, so that we can open ourselves up to what is written? To read, mark, learn and inwardly digest.

I believe that the Church needs to help people grow in their understanding of things like prayer and Bible reading, to learn more about our history, what makes Anglicanism different from other traditions, what are the essential differences – and similarities – between Christianity and the other world religions. Maybe that's something to be considered when your new vicar arrives! In the meantime I'll try to introduce some new material when the opportunities arise. We have a mandate to do this. Very recently the Anglican Communion set up a study across all continents to consider the place of the Bible in the Anglican Church. The project was called *The Bible in the Life of the Church*. Some work has been completed; some remains to be done.