

**June 13, 2021 – Third Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Ezekiel 17:22-24, Mark 4:26-34**  
**The Rev. Peggy Trendell-Jensen**

I came across a quote on social media last week and I think you will likely agree with it. If your reading of the Bible leads you to scrutinize other people more than you scrutinize yourself, it cautioned, you're reading the Bible wrong.

Jesus taught the same lesson long before Facebook was around, or at least he tried to, when he called out the hypocrisy of a man who would point at the speck in his neighbour's eye while ignoring the log in his own. Remove the log from your own eye first, he said, and then you might be clear-sighted enough to help your neighbour.

But too often we fall into the habit of reading Scripture through self-shaped spectacles that twist the living word of God into an echo of our own thoughts. Into a comfortable message that we can live with. A message that fits with our sense of the world and our sense of ourselves. And when we do so, many of us end up ignoring issues that God would never ignore, and ignoring the people that God most wants us to honour and protect.

Throughout both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament are woven songs of liberation for the oppressed. God freed the Hebrews from slavery in Exodus and in Leviticus they are admonished to, in turn, love and care for immigrants and foreigners among them. In our first reading this morning, the prophet Ezekiel describes a vision in which God brings low the high tree and makes high the low tree; God dries up the green tree and makes the dry tree flourish. In the Magnificat Mary sings of the proud being scattered and the hungry filled with good things. Jesus said the last shall be first and the first shall be last. It takes a stubborn human mind to overlook this constant refrain that we keep coming across throughout the scriptures, a refrain that has since been described as "God's preferential option for the poor."

The Bible has occasionally been redacted in an attempt to drain from it any sentiment that might encourage oppressed people to seek a better, more equitable, life. Displayed not long ago in a museum in the United States was an abridged Bible that had been published in 1807 specifically for the use of missionaries in the West-India Islands. Farmers there who relied on slave labour would not have taken kindly to missionaries putting thoughts into the heads of their workers, so this whittled-down Bible was stripped of over half its content. Not surprisingly, Paul's advice that slaves be obedient to their masters remained, while his well-known statement in Galatians that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, was left on the cutting room floor.

But we don't have to physically remove these texts from the Bible for them to be stripped of their power. To a great extent those of us who live a comfortable life,

who haven't experienced what it is like to exist on the lowest rungs of society, simply overlook the parts of scripture that might challenge us to rethink the status quo that has served us so well. And, lest you think I am pointing fingers, please know that I am speaking first and foremost to myself.

Those of us who are doing well, or well enough, resist change and we rationalize our reasons for doing so. Yes, societal structures are complex and yes, politics stick their ugly head in where they aren't helpful, but it seems to me it shouldn't get to the point where people cannot simply agree with the straightforward statement that Black lives matter without qualifying it in some fashion. As has been pointed out by others, all sheep matter, but Jesus went in search of the one who was lost. And parents know that all their children matter, but they turn their care and attention to the one who is hurting in the moment.

We were all shocked by the horrific murder of the Afzaal family in London, Ontario, killed because of their Muslim faith. How we wish we could turn back the clock and prevent the actions of the young man who aimed his newly purchased pick-up truck at a family walking down the street. Sadly, we can't do that, but we can look for ways to lift up and honour the countless people among and around us who are repeatedly stung by the thousand small cuts of being treated as foreign, as "the other," as someone with less potential, as someone who doesn't quite belong. Even some of our seemingly benign, well-intended sentiments – for example, being curious about where a person of colour came from – can be discouraging and tiring when that person is asked the same question constantly and especially if their family has lived in Canada for generations.

In this particular time we are being given the opportunity to learn more about the insidiousness and impact of racism than we ever have before. It is not easy work, it is not quickly accomplished work, but it is work to which God calls us. In this morning's reading from Ezekiel God speaks through the prophet of planting a tree on a high and lofty mountain, under which every kind of bird will live and, and in which will nest winged creatures of every kind. It is a place of diversity and inclusion. In the gospel reading the kingdom of God is described as growing from scattered seed on the ground, seed that becomes a stalk, then a head, and then plump with grain ready for harvest. For our faith to grow and flourish, we need to change and evolve. We need to see God at work in each different manifestation of our humanity if we are to build something worthy of harvest.

But I return to the vexing reality that each of us falls into the habit of seeing in scripture a mirror reflecting our own convictions. We see what we want to see, and we find what we set out to look for. Again, I am as prone to that as anyone. And we don't just do it in our scripture reading, we do it in our conversations and our media consumption. A few days ago I purchased a rather interesting card deck that teaches critical thinking; each card features a different cognitive bias and illustrates the myriad ways our mind perceives, and often misperceives, the world.

You have probably already heard of “confirmation bias” – that is, we give added credibility to information that confirms our existing beliefs. Another is the “just world hypothesis.” This means our understandable desire for a just and balanced world makes us presume, on some level, that it exists. That can lead us down the path of thinking, for example, that if someone has fallen on hard times, there is surely a reason for it. They didn’t work hard enough, or they didn’t plan responsibly. We don’t want to believe that bad things happen to good people – but of course they do. There’s the “backfire effect,” too. That means that when our core beliefs are challenged, we may cling to them with added vigour even in the face of mounting competing evidence. The list of cognitive biases goes on – it seems that we humans are not the rational creatures we may once have believed ourselves to be.

So can we overcome the tendency to create God, and the Scriptures, in our own image? How can we hear in the Bible not just God’s love for each of us reading it, but God’s challenge to us to make real the kingdom of God in our homes, in our neighbourhoods, in our world?

There are different methods of Bible study that help us with this; one I recall reading about is to read a Sunday scripture passage and sit with it, hearing how it resonates with our own experience and what message it offers us for living our life more faithfully. Nothing unusual in that. But then instead of stopping there, one then tries to read that same passage through the eyes of someone who is a refugee. Or disabled. Or unable to feed their family. Or an immigrant family of a different faith. What might that scripture passage say to them? And what can we learn from that? Does it change our understanding of God’s kingdom? Does it remind us that the Bible wasn’t written for the personal benefit of people just like you and me, but for people of all times and places?

We can quickly see how narrow our perspective must be when we do not have people with widely diverse experiences and backgrounds living and worshipping among us. Now, I’m not saying we can’t have a good perspective, but it is inevitably a narrow one. How much each of us might grow as citizens and as Christians should we choose to make a habit of listening curiously and non-defensively to the stories and experiences of all the people all around us – people who may look like us but live in vastly different circumstances; people who don’t look like us but perhaps share much in common; people who are accustomed to being overlooked by people like us.

The Book of Common Prayer invites us to “hear what comfortable words our Lord saith to all who truly turn unto him.” And what an *en-couraging* invitation that is. Because the word “comfort” comes from the Latin meaning “with strength” – comfort in the Biblical context isn’t just the reassurance that one’s own anxieties will be quelled, it is a promise that with Jesus we will be given the courage and fortitude to make right the world for others.

As church and society begin to open up and gatherings are re-introduced, we will have again the opportunity to leave our homes, widen our circles and find ourselves in new conversations. This is our chance to explore new habits and figure out a better and more expansive normal. Let us pray that as we each create our own post-pandemic world, we commit ourselves to hearing the word of God not just in scripture but in the stories, joys and sorrows of people of all creeds and colours.