

# Sunday Homily

## LAST SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY/ BIBLE SUNDAY

24 OCTOBER 2021

YEAR B

“You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf.”

John 5:39

### Illustration

Many of us have a deep longing for certainty. This is not necessarily wrong. So much of our lives and our world is in flux, and there seems so little that we can really rely on that it is hardly surprising if we want assurance that some things will never change. Nor is it surprising that, for many people, this place of assurance and certainty is their religious faith. God does not change, after all, so surely this eternal changelessness should be reflected in the Church? Even people who never set foot inside a church can get surprisingly angry and upset when there is news that their local parish church might close, or that there is to be a new translation of the Bible or the Lord’s Prayer. Some things just must not change.

But the trouble is that sometimes, if things are to continue to serve their original purpose, they have to change their form. Parish churches are built to house a worshipping community, and if the community has moved, then so must the building. It is not the building itself that matters, but the purpose for which it was designed.

### Gospel Teaching

This is what Jesus is painstakingly trying to explain to his accusers in today’s Gospel, and it is part of a struggle for understanding that goes on throughout his ministry. In the earlier part of chapter 5 of John’s Gospel, Jesus has performed a miracle on the sabbath. He has healed a lame man, and caused great controversy by doing so. According to the strict letter of the Jewish scriptures, as they were then interpreted, Jesus should not have been doing this kind of thing on the official day of rest, and, in doing so, he was challenging the unchanging certainties by which his accusers lived.

But Jesus is trying to argue that, on the contrary, it is they who have changed what they inherited by refusing to allow it to adapt. The Law of Moses, handed down through generations, was designed to build a distinctive people, whose whole lifestyle and society would demonstrate the nature of God. The Law, and the scriptures that bear witness to it, are not ends in themselves, Jesus is arguing, but means to an end.

And, he says, with fierce clarity, they clearly are not serving the ends for which they were designed, because God's people do not know what God is like. If they did, they would recognise Jesus. They would recognise that what he did, what he taught, all that he was, was continuous with all that God's chosen people have always known about the nature of God, through their laws and their scriptures. Instead, they have allowed the laws to mask God, when they were designed to reveal him. They have become so attached to the letter of the Law that they have forgotten that the Law serves God, and that it will not act out of character. The Law must not be allowed to dictate the nature of God and what God will or will not do for his people. Jesus' accusers say that he is changing the Law, but really it is they who have changed it by applying it so strictly, so inhumanly, that it cannot any longer reveal the God who shaped it.

## Application

It is a terrifying thought that we might be betraying God by what we see to be our faithfulness. Yet if we cling to certainties, rather than to God, that is almost bound to happen. The Bible, like the Law, bears witness to God. It is designed to show us the shape of lives lived in obedience to God. Scripture will not act in a way that is not characteristic of God, because it is God's tool. If we make it into a weapon of hatred, or division, or false reassurance, then we will be in danger of losing the ability to discern God.

Throughout the Bible, we see the nature of God displayed, culminating in Jesus. It is the Bible's job to help shape us into God's likeness, and we must not make it serve any other ends. The most damning thing that Jesus says to his questioners in today's Gospel is that it is Moses himself, the one they thought they were serving, who would condemn them for not recognising Jesus. How awful it would be if we found that we had used the scriptures, which we think we love, to hide the face of Jesus for our generation.