Hebrews

Studying a book of the Bible can, obviously, be done in several ways. Some people do it in the spirit of curiosity or perhaps out of interest in a book which has massively shaped the world in which we live. Some look at it as 'literature'. In some circles – especially of the academic or professional sort – the Bible is examined as sort of a parlour game to see who can conjure the latest novelty using whatever currently fashionable analytical and interpretive tool comes to hand and which can sooth the ear of those to whom it is relayed.

But, if a person accepts that the Bible is the word of God revealed to us for our salvation, then studying the Bible becomes something profoundly different – it becomes the word of life. There are several implications flowing from this conviction about the nature and purpose of the Bible. We do not all have the same appetite or aptitude for textual study, just as some are 'handy' and some are not. But this is a point of little moment since reading is a widely spread skill. And the life-giving potential in the Bible comes not from 'study' *per se* but from the work of the Holy Spirit giving insight and understanding to our hearts and minds. In other words, the Bible is God's living word. Nonetheless, receiving the life-giving word is not simply a matter of passing one's eyes over a text or having one's auditory faculty stimulated. Paying attention, thinking about, considering, reflecting, assessing, comparing and concluding are vital elements – engagement, in a word, is essential. And further: what attitude is adopted? Committed, eager, willing, motivated, receptive, humble – the list obviously could be extended. Of all the possible attitudes, the most important one, I think, is commitment – commitment to hear what God is saying through the Bible. And linked to commitment should be a conviction that what is heard will be vital to my life today – that what I 'hear' will have an effect on how I think, behave, respond, engage and act. Although the Bible was written over a long period of time in a wide variety of forms, in societies and cultures very different from our own and its composition was concluded a long, long time ago – it still 'speaks' *now* to us. Without this conviction, why pick up the Bible?

The conviction that studying the Bible is vital for the Holy Spirit to change and re-shape our lives brings the obvious question: how does this happen? In what way does it take place? The answer is, of course, that the process is a spiritual one and happens spiritually. True – but not, perhaps, immediately very clear. It is more accessible to think about the changing and re-shaping of ourselves in terms of our minds and hearts – what guides our thinking, our emotions, our actions? What do we hold to be true about our very existence and nature? And what, as a consequence, do we do with others? What kind of 'principles' or guidelines underlie us and our behaviours? With what beliefs do we engage and interact with the conditions, circumstances etc. (political, economic, ideological etc.) of our own day? What do we think about the future? And in what ways do these very beliefs affect our actions and behaviour?

So – like marriage, studying the Bible "is not to be entered into lightly". On this basis, I consider that studying the 'book' of Hebrews will be of immediate and lasting value. (See further Hebrews 4:12)

Why Hebrews? There are several reasons, but I offer only two here – the rest are for the study, so come. Hebrews is worthy of study not least because, although it contains well-know sections (e.g. the roll of faithful in chapter 11), it is not often studied as a whole – so, if some of it is good, then the whole must be even better! It is, also, a self-described exhortation (Hebs. 13:22) to live the Christian life – and which of us doesn't need encouragement, explanation, warning, demonstration, or admonishment to "run the race set before" (Hebs. 12:1)?

Titles can be helpful. So I've shamelessly adopted a title from Hebrews itself (Hebs. 12:28) and from an excellent little study by David Gooding which has deeply influenced my understanding: *An Unshakable Kingdom*.

Should you be even modestly intrigued, I would urge you to read Hebrews in as few 'sittings' as you can manage.

The practical question 'when' receives the answer: the four Mondays in January at 7 p.m. at CtK for an hour and a half. The format will be: an overview from me followed by questions and discussion from you and me.

My final point: I am strongly of the conviction that the message of Hebrews is very much a message for our time. And even if joining the study is not possible or to your taste, read the book!