

The other week there was an article in the paper with the headline 'Are our Smartphone's making us stupid?' It suggested that because we can find out everything with a tap of a button, we're losing our ability to retain information. And it also said that because we can so easily use Google maps or a Satnav to take us where we want, we're losing our ability to make maps in our head.

That can lead to problems. My Dad had a few issues with his Satnav - he swears blind that it once took him to the crematorium and then said 'You have now reached your final destination.' Sarah's Satnav nearly got her stuck in the ford near the Bridgnorth Rd because she didn't have any idea about where she was meant to be going - which was Merry Hill! And sometimes Satnavs get lorries stuck down farm tracks or take cars to the edge of cliffs. Satnavs used without any understanding of a map can be pretty dangerous.

But maps used on their own can be a problem too. Particularly if only one of you can read a map and he's the driver. Sarah often used to be the one watching the road whilst I held the steering wheel and looked at the map on her lap - not a safe situation. So we're a lot better now with a Satnav - particularly in a city centre, when the turns come thick and fast and a street might suddenly be blocked. And Satnavs also adjust when you've taken the wrong turn - which David & I have been grateful for at times in Walsall town centre!

So, the answer may be that it's good to have both a map and a satnav. But what has this got to do with our readings today?

In our gospel reading Nicodemus comes to see Jesus and wants to make sense of what is happening. Jesus talks to him about being born again - born of the Spirit. 'The Spirit blows where it chooses - no one knows where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.' So - map or Satnav? We might think of the Spirit as our equivalent of a Satnav - on onboard guidance system. If we are able to tune in, we may then be able to be led by God in new directions - like Abraham. He had no map of the country he was going for - he was told just to leave home and go the 'the country that I will show you.'

But as we know, tuning in isn't always easy. If you have a satnav you may have experienced that annoying wait while it is 'acquiring satellites' - usually when you've set off down a street and you have no idea whether to turn right or left at the end.

It is possible to learn to be sensitive to the guidance of the Spirit. But it takes practice - times of stillness, a growing sensitivity to the stirring of God in our Spirit - an ability to discern between guidance and whim. So unless we want to end up on the edge of a cliff, we need something else as well.

When Nicodemus says to Jesus 'How can these things be?', Jesus replies 'Are you a teacher of Israel and still you do not understand these things?' Jesus didn't teach in a vacuum. He expected his Jewish listeners to have read the map, by reading the scriptures. Sometimes he showed them how to reinterpret what they had read - but he didn't want them to throw the map away.

So we can think of the Bible like that - our spiritual map. But it isn't a straightforward one. One Friday I went for a walk on the Long Mynd. I had my trusty Ordnance Survey map, and I also had a hand drawn map in a book of circular walks - and I used both together.

The bible is like a whole collection of maps - drawn by different people, with different scales - some impressionistic or vague - 'Here be dragons' - some more detailed and carefully drawn. Together they give us a picture of how people have understood God, and how they have understood the landscape of faith. They show us some of the dangerous areas to avoid, and point us in the direction of some reliable paths.

If in doubt, I would always go back to my OS map, and when it comes to the Bible, I would always want to use what Jesus says and does as the most important guidance. But if we really get to know the bible, we build up a rich resource of guidance.

I once read a book about preaching, which suggested that the problem with having a sermon on a different passage every week - or every fortnight - is that it's a bit like being given a different piece of a jigsaw puzzle each time, without ever having the whole picture. That's why bible notes are good, like the BRF notes that a lot of people in our churches use. They often go through a whole book. But you can do it without notes as well. It doesn't take much more than an hour to read through Mark's gospel, and it takes a lot less to read a beautiful book like Ruth, or a funny and challenging one like Jonah.

That would be a good thing to do this Lent - read through a book or two of the bible, and build up your picture - a bit like getting a new map, which is a great moment!

So reading the map of faith in the scriptures is good - but it isn't enough. The Pharisees read the scriptures but they got stuck in a dead end. Sadly, sometimes people get so fixed on the words themselves that they become fundamentalists, trying to apply laws meant for a community 3000 years ago to modern life.

That's why we need the Spirit - to breathe life into the words, and to blow us in new directions. When you think of Storm Doris, the wind can be pretty powerful, so when Jesus challenges Nicodemus to be open to the wind of the Spirit he's not advocating simply following a safe set of rules. He's calling Nicodemus to let God's Spirit blow him

in directions he's never even thought about, to places he can't even imagine - like Abraham.

Once again, there is a danger. Those who throw away the map - or the chart - and just follow the Spirit can easily be led into dangerous waters, as I'm sure Tim would say with his sailing hat on. People sometimes focus so much on their sense of God's personal message to them, that they can become not fundamentalists but fanatics, living in a fantasy. They often choose just one tiny part of the scriptures to follow and lose all sense of the big picture.

We're struggling with some big issues in the church of England, especially at the moment, same sex marriage. To find the way forward we need both the map and the Satnav - both the scriptures and the Spirit - one grounding us in the tradition of our faith, the other blowing us into new interpretations and new directions.

And the same is true for each of us. I wonder if you are more a map person or a satnav person? I wonder if you prefer to follow written guidelines or to be open to the prompting of the Spirit? Lent might be a good time to rebalance ourselves- to get out the map again and get to know the lie of the land, by reading our bibles - or to spend some time trying to tune in to God's Spirit and seek his direction each day. Or maybe we could do both!

I'm going to end with a prayer by a former Bishop of Norwich, written for a pilgrimage he made around his diocese, back in the days before satnavs....

O Lord God,
from whom we come,
in whom we are enfolded,
to whom we shall return:
bless us in our pilgrimage through life;
with the power of the Father protecting,
with the love of Jesus indwelling,
and the light of the Spirit guiding,
until we come to our ending,
in life and love eternal.
Amen.