

Bible Sunday– Kate Day

Nehemiah 8:1-12
Matthew 24:30-35

I wonder how many of us recognised that fabulous Collect which we prayed this morning? It's the Collect for Bible Sunday, which at one time we used to observe on the second Sunday of Advent, and it has the same ring to it as many of the stirring Advent collects. These days, Bible Sunday is an option for the last Sunday of Trinity, which falls today – hence the readings and the collect, with its memorable exhortation to “read, mark, learn and inwardly digest” the scriptures. Growing up, I was never sure whether I preferred the joke about “read Mark? What’s wrong with the other gospels?”; or the thought that I might actually munch away at the pages of the massive dusty old book chained to the golden eagle lectern at the front of church so that I could “inwardly digest” them. A pretty grim prospect. But more of that later....

So – the Bible. The foundational texts of our faith. Reckoned to be the best-selling and most-read book in the world. Humanity’s account of our understanding of God’s dealings with his creation, from the beginning to the end of time. Not so much “a book” as a library of books – written at different times, by a variety of individuals, and compiled by leaders within the faith community – all under the guidance of God’s Holy Spirit.

Divided into two parts. The first - the Old Testament – tells of the exclusive relationship between God and the chosen people of Israel. A relationship which was originally intended to demonstrate the character and love of God to the rest of the world, but which the people of Israel could not live up to.

The second – the New Testament – tells the story of Jesus, God himself made human, living and dying to show us what God is really like; rising again to show that all that separates us from God has been defeated. Establishing a new relationship between God and anyone, of whatever background, who accepts his invitation to “follow me.” And it tells the story of how the early followers of Jesus lived out their calling to “go and make disciples,” filled and inspired by the Spirit of God living and active in their lives.

It’s a collection of wisdom, poetry, history, law and teaching. Of biography, prophecy, and instruction. It contains words of incredibly beauty and power, and stories which quite frankly make us want to respond in horror “Is this the

word of the Lord?” Passages which challenge, passages which comfort – but all of which show us something of God or of ourselves, and frequently of both.

So it's against this background that we come to our OT reading this morning. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul writes that “all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” What might this passage have to say to us? It's a reading from one of the history books of the OT, and the story of how scripture was read to an assembly of people, and what happened when it was.

In brief, the people are gathered together, and the “book of the law”- their scripture or “Bible” - is brought to them. The people listen attentively as it is read.

As the priest reads it, his assistants (the Levites) “helped the people to understand... So they read from the book with interpretation. They gave the sense, so the people understood the reading.”

And as the people listened and understood, they began to weep, but the leaders said, “do not be grieved for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” And then they had a big party.

And from this account, I'd like to draw out three points which can perhaps help us as we think about how we engage with scripture, both as individuals and as the people of God in Shirley Parish.

Firstly, they **set aside time**. The story tells us that Ezra the priest read from the scripture from the early morning until midday. That's some commitment. And it also tells us that all of them listened. Attentively. All the people – “men and women and all who could hear with understanding.” Not just some of them – those who were leaders, or the particularly spiritual – all recognised the importance of attending to God's message to them through scripture. In the OT, there is a great sense of the people of God being the entire community. In the NT this is often extended to being both the entire gathered community (the church), and the individual disciple (each of us individually), but the important message here is that reading scripture is for everyone, and that we should set aside time to do it. Attentively.

The second point is that it was read **with interpretation**. I wonder if the reason so many of us find “reading the Bible” so difficult is because we are not often told that most of the time we need help to do so. Jesus has the best stories

and was a wonderful communicator, but if you have listened to any of our midweek reflections on the parables, you will know that, even with these apparently straightforward readings, there is often much more going on than is apparent on the surface.

And interpretation can take several forms. First, there is almost always extra information which can help us to shed light on what is going on in the passage. So, for example, it may help in the understanding of this passage from Nehemiah to know that it's set in Jerusalem. That the people have just returned there after spending almost a hundred years in exile, which, they believe, was a punishment for not following God's ways. That during this time they were deprived of their sense of identity as God's chosen people, their sense of nationhood, and their ability to worship God in the Temple which they saw as his home on earth. And that Ezra the priest is reading to these returnees the scripture which sets out the promises which God has made to their nation and how they should live as his people – showing how all that had been taken away during their exile might be restored. And that it's likely that the scripture needed to be interpreted to them because it was written in a language which they – the second and third generation on from those taken into exile – no longer speak or understand. No wonder they listened attentively. No wonder they wept.

So, interpretation in the form of information can help us when we read. But interpretation can also help us to see what the passage might be saying to us in our current circumstances. I have read and heard some great sermons and reflections over the past months, which have used scripture to help us to find God during the pandemic. Interpretations which have brought me comfort, and hope – and ones which have challenged me as well.

And for both these reasons, information and 'help to reflect on what is happening in our everyday lives', it is really important to have some "interpretation" to hand when we read the Bible. Sermons and midweek reflections are produced to do just that. Books or booklets of readings with comments and interpretations are brilliant. Some have readings for every day. Others are undated, so they can be picked up and read at any time. Some people like to meet with others to share their thoughts. That's also a really excellent idea. No one of us has the whole picture.

But there is a further way in which scripture can be interpreted to us, and that's directly by the Spirit of God. Sometimes God will just give us a nudge, and we know that the passage (or even just a few words) we are reading is especially for us – to comfort, to inspire or maybe to challenge. Sometimes

people wonder if they have “heard” correctly; then it can be really useful to share what you think you have heard with someone you trust. And if it helps – that recommendation comes from the Bible too!

So, all of us setting aside time to engage with Scripture, and then reading with interpretation...

The third and final point from this passage is **to respond**. To act. Thus far it’s been a lot about information. In the first session of the Way of Discipleship we thought about “the difference between studying the word of God and living it”, about the importance of “getting it off the page and into our lives.” We even heard about the prophet Ezekiel, who was instructed to literally eat a scroll containing God’s words (and presumably to inwardly digest them, as in the Collect). To take God’s words into his physical body, his life and his actions.

In the Nehemiah story, the people respond with tears, as they hear God’s rules for living and realise how far they have fallen short of them. It implies that they repent – turn away from the old ways. And then they put that repentance into action. Firstly, they turn back to God to acknowledge and celebrate that they are still his chosen people, and that he has brought them home to Jerusalem. They party as they live out that “the joy of the Lord is your strength.” And then, when they have celebrated God’s unconditional love, in the passage which follows this one, they throw themselves on his mercy, seek forgiveness, and commit themselves afresh to following in his ways.

So, three things to take from this reading:

Setting aside time to engage with Scripture.

Reading with interpretation.

Getting the Scripture off the page and into our lives.

And pulling all these together, how might we respond?

Well, maybe we can see some parallels between this passage and where we are as a church community today. It tells of a people who have returned from exile, as they face a future which they know will be both exciting and scary. Some of us will have felt “exiled” from the church buildings. Some of us may still feel that way. I am sure we are all feeling “exiled” from the old familiar ways of living life and of being church. We are preparing for a future which we know will be full of both challenges and wonderful opportunities.

The people in the story sought their inspiration from the story of the faithful loving God as set out in Scripture, and committed themselves to follow in his ways: to pay attention, seek interpretation, and to respond with their lives.

Perhaps we might follow their example?