

Nehemiah 8

Bring out the book

As Jesus reached a high point in his popularity ratings early on in his ministry, people were flocking to see him. He had just appeared on the scene, but already people were asking

- Who is this?
- Is this the Messiah?
- How can he make blind people see?
- What's he going to do next?

And Jesus' response?

To the astonishment of his disciples he did not start the revolution by leading them against the Romans, in fact he did not even hint at organising a new movement, he told them a story; not even a particularly exciting one at that. He told them about a farmer sowing seed in a field.

You can almost hear the disciples saying: "Jesus, what are you doing? These people are desperate for someone or something which will change their lives and give them purpose,

meaning, direction – and you are telling them a story about a farmer sowing seed?!"

But Jesus says to them: "*The seed is the Word of God*" In other words, the thing which will change people's lives is the Word of God.

Now let's go back several centuries in time to Nehemiah chapter 8. The walls of Jerusalem have been rebuilt and the gates are in place, but the work of building a new community is only just starting. Because it is not the walls that make the city, it is the people. And what strikes me here is that it is not just that there are great leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah who want to hear God's word, it is "*all the people*" who gather as one and tell Ezra to "*Bring out the book*" (verse 1), the book being the Law of Moses, the early part of the Hebrew Bible.

One of the marks of a genuine spiritual revival is that it is not whipped up artificially by religious leaders but stirred up from within by the Spirit of God. The people themselves had a desire to hear God's word and could not get enough of it. Like the psalm writers they found

that the Scriptures were sweeter than honey, a lamp to their feet, the joy of their hearts and more valuable than gold.

And so, a few days after the walls have been completed, hundreds of men women and children gather within the walls for a celebration in which God's written word plays a big part.

In an age where surveys indicate that only a small percentage of those who go to church actually read the Bible on a daily basis, these people have got some important lessons for us. *They gathered as one man* (verse 1). They were from different homes, no doubt some were taught the Scriptures at home and others were not, some were newcomers and others had been in Jerusalem for a long time, but what mattered were not the differences but their common desire to hear the word of God.

Is that a good picture of us as we meet this morning in the North Church? Each of us has a different life story, we bring different views on many different subjects, we have different

achievements and different needs, different likes and dislikes, but are we not united in our desire to hear God's Word, to apply it to our lives? We may not explain every Bible verse in exactly the same way, and Christians will always have varying interpretations of such matters as baptism, the Lord's Supper, healing, the nature of the church and the Second Coming of Christ, but the things which unite us are far greater than the things which divide us; and indeed the very fact that we come this morning to listen to God speaking through his word should unite us.

What an audience these people were! "*All the people listened attentively to the book of the law*" (verse 3). Clearly this congregation did not believe they were listening to something which was just an ancient document which God had given to Moses centuries before. They expected God to speak to them as they listened. This is where I find that these people are a rebuke to me. So often my Bible reading is done in a hurry, or is half-hearted because my

mind is elsewhere or it is just done out of a sense of routine. And yet Christians down through the centuries have found that it takes time, patience and quiet to really take in the message of Scripture. Many of them used the word meditation to describe this process of creating space to allow the word to penetrate the mind, stir the heart and direct the will. Public worship should involve our whole being – our minds, our voices, our emotions, our will, our aesthetic sense – and, yes, our bodies too. As Ezra opened the book, all the people stood up (verse 5) as a sign of respect. Then as Ezra praised the Lord, *“all the people lifted their hands and responded “Amen, amen”. Then they bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.”*(verse 6) How we respond physically in worship is largely a matter of church tradition. Some of you have heard me tell the story of my niece who was out in Kenya worshipping with Kenyan Christians. They had a chorus which went something like this:

“The Masai worship God like this” and they would all jump up and down. Then there was a verse which said:

“The white man worships God like this” and they all froze!

Of course what matters is the state of our hearts as we worship, not whether we dance or not.

But on the other hand perhaps we of the Presbyterian tradition should perhaps feel less inhibited and freer to add our Amen to what is being said, thus identifying our selves with what is being said and add our “Yes, may it be so”.

The people bowed, not because they had some superstitious reverence of the Bible, but because they recognised the presence of the Lord, the Holy One. We too do not worship the Bible, but we adore the God who inspired it and still speaks to us through it today.

You may have noticed the emphasis on understanding the word. We see this in verses 2, 3 and 8.

“The Levites ... read from the book ... making it clear and giving the meaning” (verse 8). This was partly because the Law of Moses was written in Hebrew and many of the returning exiles spoke a different language called Aramaic. This reminds us that people of every language have the right to have access to the Word of God in their own language. We who are English speakers are so fortunate because we have the luxury of having the Bible available in many different translations and paraphrases. It is easy to forget that there are still over 4,000 languages in the world which have no Bible translation at all and many others where there is only a part of Scripture available.

But the Levites who were students of the Law of Moses) appear to have explained the Bible as they went along. The Bible is not an easy book to read. It does speak directly to us, it does need to be interpreted and explained. Sermons, if they are any good, should be a help to understanding. Indeed, one mark of a good

sermon is that you go home knowing a part of the Scriptures better than before you came. But there are also many good aids to understanding the Bible in our own reading. I have here a book by Nicky Gumble called *30 days, a 30 day practical introduction to reading the Bible*. It answers questions like “How should I read the Bible?”, “Where should I start?” and “How is the Bible relevant to my life?”

There are also a whole variety of Bible reading notes for all ages and experiences available from Christian bookshops or, if you use the internet, from the Scripture Union website. However, this comes with a warning; taking God’s word seriously can seriously change your life. Away back in the book of Deuteronomy God had told the people of that time how important God’s commands were to be;

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commands that I give you

today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.”

(Deuteronomy 6:4-7)

To put it another way, the story of who God is and what God has done and what he requires us to do should fill our whole being, it should be something we share with our children and something we talk about inside and outside our homes. It should even be in our thoughts as we sleep and as we awaken.

As the people heard the word of God *they wept* (verse 9), because they realised that they had not lived up to God’s standard. God’s word exposed their selfish lifestyles, their disloyalty to God and their need for forgiveness, issues which will be dealt with in greater detail in the following chapters.

Scripture not only makes us aware of our failings, it opens our eyes to the needs of others. The people were not to start wallowing in guilt when there was a world out there which

needed to know about forgiveness and love. This was a day for rejoicing, a time to celebrate God’s compassion for all people. The holiday was to be marked by festival meals to which families should invite their neighbours and anyone who lacked the bare necessities of life. Readings from Deuteronomy would have reminded them that God was concerned about the poor, widows, orphans, refugees – in fact anyone who had “*nothing prepared*” (verse 10).

The NT too leaves us in no doubt that we cannot ignore the cry of the poor. John puts it like this:

“If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.” (1 John 3:17,18)

You see the wonderful balance that there is in Scripture. We need to respond personally to God’s word as we see our sin and our need to repent and be forgiven. But then we should let

Scripture widen our horizons out into the global village we live in. We need to look for opportunities for service in a world where God wants us to be, in the words of Martin Luther, “a Christ to our neighbour”. Our faith is personal; it has to be our unique response to God. But it is not private; it reaches out into the world around us.

As the people are told to send gifts of food and drink to their less fortunate neighbours, they are reminded that they have received from God gifts which money could never buy. “*The joy of the Lord is your strength.*” (verse 10)

In fact, the rest of the chapter is a good example of people finding how the joy of the Lord can be their strength. They are told to celebrate a seven day feast, which was an annual festival reminding them of the journey their ancestors had made through the desert. They were to live in booths, simple tents made of leaves and branches, as their ancestors had done after their escape from slavery in Egypt. It was a festival designed to do 3 things:

- **Thanks for the past.** They were not to forget what God had done for them in keeping them safe through the dangers of the desert. Even now, many of them did not have a house to live in, despite the achievement of building the walls. But this was a reminder that their confidence did not come from walls and buildings but from the Lord. The feast of tents is still celebrated by Jews today. As Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains: “The tent symbolises faith; the faith of a people who set out across a desert with no more protection than the sheltering divine presence.”
- **Witness in the present.** Another aim of the festival was to “*proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem*” (verse 15). People who did not know the history of the Jews would naturally ask “What are you doing living in tents?” It gave a tremendous opportunity for them to pass on to

outsiders as well as to their own children the story of what God had done and indeed what he was continuing to do for them.

- **Confidence in the future.** The people's faith was ultimately not in city walls but in God. Like Abraham who also lived in a tent they "*looked forward to a city with foundations whose architect and builder is God.*" And as Christians, we also look beyond this world to heaven, the city which God has built. As Christians, we believe that the world which we see around us is not the sum total of all that God has for us. The best is yet to be.

We could sum up today's chapter from Nehemiah by saying that here we see a people who are finding the source of true happiness. The people found their joy in life, not in being lucky or rich or popular but in the Lord. They found joy in who God is, what he gives, what he does and what he says. They found joy, despite the harsh realities around them, as they

worshipped God, as they appreciated God's word and as they moved out in response to that word in service to others and in witness.

My prayer for us here this morning is that we may find, both as individuals and as a community, that the joy of the Lord is our strength.