**Sermon Stowe October 27 2024**

**Bible Sunday**

**Nehemiah 8: 1-12**

**8 1**All the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel.

**2**So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. **3**He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

**4**Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.

**5**Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. **6**Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, ‘Amen! Amen!’ Then they bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

**7**The Levites – Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah – instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. **8**They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Nehemiah%208%3A1-12&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-12502a)] and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

**9**Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, ‘This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep.’ For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

**10**Nehemiah said, ‘Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.’

**11**The Levites calmed all the people, saying, ‘Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve.’

**12**Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

**2 Timothy 3: 14 – 4:5**

**14**But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, **15**and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. **16**All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, **17**so that the servant of God[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2%20Timothy%203%3A14%20-%204%3A5&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-29871a)] may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

**4**In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: **2**preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction. **3**For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather round them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. **4**They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. **5**But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

About 500 years before the birth of Christ, Israel was a weak and divided nation, and Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon invaded Jerusalem, broke down its walls, destroyed the first Temple and took the majority of the population away into captivity. You may remember the Boney M song – “*By the Rivers of Babylon*”? Based on Psalm 137. Only the poorest were left in Jerusalem to inhabit the ruins of that once great city.

This situation continued for about 100 years until another King, Cyrus of Assyria, began to allow the captives to return to their homeland. So, for all that time, the people who had been in captivity had been kept away from the holy places of Jerusalem and the people in Jerusalem had been defenceless and without a Temple. Whilst both of these groups would have been aware of being culturally Jewish, it is likely that they had little idea of the religious contents of what it meant to be Jewish as any form of worship or the reading of Scripture would have been extremely rare.

The book of Nehemiah tells the story of the rebuilding of Jerusalem by the returning exiles and our reading from Chapter 8 is the moving account of people’s reaction when they hear the scriptures read aloud.

First they listened attentively as the law of Moses was read and explained to them, and in response to hearing the Word of God first they bowed down and worshipped with their faces on the ground (v. 6) and then they wept, (v.9) – in fact they wept so much that the priests had to tell them to stop!

Imagine the scene – hundreds if not thousands of people who have been starved of scripture for many years bowing down and crying as they hear the foundation of their faith proclaimed afresh to them for possibly the first time in generations. Why were they crying? – you may think that if you were made to stand outside for hours while the OT was read to you that you might cry too – however I think they had a different reason: On hearing the Word of God in the form of Scripture they were rediscovering their place in relation to God and in relation to each other, and they were grieving for what they had been missing out on for so long.

It was like a starving man suddenly being offered a feast, or someone long separated from their family suddenly seeing their loved ones come into view. They had lost the word of God - they had lost an important part of their identity - and now suddenly it was here, being read and explained to them and first they wept with joy and then celebrated a sacred day.

Today we celebrate Bible Sunday, which is promoted by the Bible Society. The Bible Society started in Wales with the story of a young girl who was desperate to own her own Bible. Her name was Mary Jones and she lived near Cadaer Idris, and at the age of 9 she decided that she must have her own Bible. However this was the 1790s and Bibles were large volumes and very expensive. And so she started working and saving and for six years she scraped together enough money. But she lived in a tiny hamlet and the nearest shop with bibles in was 26 miles away in Bala. And so, in the year 1800 at the age of 15 she wrapped some bread and cheese into a cloth and walked across the hills and valleys the 26 miles to Bala. But when she got there all the Welsh bibles had either been sold or reserved. She was so distraught that the bookshop owner took pity on her and let her buy one of the reserved copies. And when she held it for the first time she said “Thank you Jesus.” The bookshop owner was called Thomas Charles and he was so touched by Mary’s story that in 1804 he started the Bible Society to try and make Bibles available to as many people as possible.

But did you know that in large parts of our world in quite recent history it has been illegal to own a bible? In Stalin’s Russia, Mao’s China, Burma (Myanmar), North Korea today and doubtless others, it has been a serious offence to own or distribute bibles. And yet in each of those countries there has always flourished an underground route of those who are prepared to smuggle them in at huge personal risk in order for the written word of God to get to those who want it. Remember Brother Andrew, God’s smuggler?

When thinking about reading the Bible, do you think of it as a bit of a chore, or do you think of it as the people in Jerusalem did, as a cause of worship and tears of repentance? If it is the former then could I suggest, with humility as a fellow sinner, that one way of getting to know God better is to cast off some of our modern cynicism and to re-engage with the Word of God by reading the bible regularly and prayerfully?

But I have to say that reading the bible is not always without its challenges – there are bits that are difficult or a bit boring or hard to understand

Fortunately we are not living an underground faith – there are thousands of resources out there, easily available to us, to help us read our bibles regularly and to help us understand them. We can read them in groups and discuss the meaning; we can use bible notes. There are many online resources to guide us and help us. The only thing we need to provide is the decision. Did you know that it is possible to read the whole bible in a year taking about 20 minutes a day? You can even get special bibles in one year that give us a chunk of old testament, new testament, proverbs or psalm every day so all the hard work is done for you. You only need to decide to do it and you can do it.

Of course this does not mean that you can only be a good Christian if you read your bible regularly. Far from it. I know some people who can quote chapter and verse and yet seem to miss the heart of the faith; and I have known others who are barely literate but who really live it. A faith that consists only of words is powerless, and we are privileged to be able to encounter God not only between the covers of a book but also in our hearts by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and in the sharing of the sacraments. But that is not to downplay the importance of the gift that God gives us in his written word – I would love everyone here to re-approach the bible like the Israelites hearing it again for the first time in generations and be prepared to receive that word with tears of joy and repentance and with a heart quickened by a deepening of your relationship with God.

When Paul wrote to young Timothy, he knew the importance of the Scriptures. Paul, as a Pharisee, was very well versed in OT texts. ‘All Scripture is God-breathed’. I like that translation. When I open the pages of Scripture, I can remember that God has breathed His Spirit into the pages as I read.

Paul urges Timothy to continue in what he has learned and been taught and is convinced of. He tells him to preach the word in season and without, or as one translation puts it ‘whether it is convenient or not.’

We are not all evangelists. Not every Christian has that gift; but we are all witnesses. And so we should be prepared to speak up. As Peter put it, ‘…in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.’

I think that’s clear enough, don’t you? But I’m aware some Christians are not comfortable with sharing their faith. Maybe they think they will be asked a questions they can’t answer. Maybe they don’t think they know the Bible well enough to quote from it or, again, to answer questions.

Of course, witnessing can take several forms. If we behave well, if we do certain things and don’t do other things, it will often be noticed by outsiders and provoke comment. “Preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary use words” is a popular saying attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, but there is no evidence that he actually said it. However, it is worth remembering, except that there are occasions when we should speak up and say something. And in those circumstances it is good if we know our Bibles.