

Sunday Morning Worship

Readings and Prayers 29th October 2023



Nehemiah 8.1-4, 8-12

All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand.

So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, 'This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.' For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, 'Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and

do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.' So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, 'Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.' And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

This is the word of the Lord.

Colossians 3.12-17

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

This is the word of the Lord.

Matthew 24.30-35

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew.

Glory to you, O Lord.

Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see "the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven" with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ³³ So also, when you see all these things, you know that he^[a] is near, at the very gates. ³⁴ Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Reflection (by Rob Holdsworth)

By way of introduction to our theme, two thoughts struck me:

- Firstly, Jesus knew His Bible well and he knew its importance for living life well. Remember that time as a 12yr old when He was in the Temple, and everyone was amazed by his knowledge? All those times when He quoted from His Bible? That time when he was faced with an important decision and said 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'?...

- And secondly it's struck me that God's word is held aloft in this church, physically every Sunday, a reminder that we need to hold a high view of the authority of Scripture as God's inspired and revealed word. OT/NT: at the end of each the reader says: this is the word of the Lord; and we all say thanks be to God, and what an extraordinary claim we make every Sunday: the Creator of the Universe is speaking to humanity, and to us here at St Stephen's.

Tempting though it was to do an A-Z of my favourite Bible characters, I'm confident that we should focus on our three readings and consider their relevance to us today. So:

To our first reading: It's 5th Century BC. The destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, the pain of those 70 years of exile in Babylon – very recent history, and the writer of Nehemiah knew all about it, but the time of return to the promised land has come; Nehemiah and others are given permission to return from Babylon, and back they go. The altar and then the temple and then the city walls are rebuilt, but the previous chapters in Nehemiah show that God's people were living in the midst of economic unfairness, at a time of political instability and insecurity, internationally and locally, and with outsiders repeatedly mocking and ridiculing them for their faith.

What happened? The people chose to turn to the Bible as they had it, old Testament books that we still have in our own Bibles; and in a time of uncertainty, pressure, and risk, they had it read and explained.

Ponder this: those people in Jerusalem that day listened attentively to God's word (v3), and they did so with open ears and open hearts, and what they heard touched them to the quick (they were all weeping, as v9 says). We don't know why – maybe remorse for the reasons that led to the exile after all those years of idolatry? We don't know; but what we do know is that they heard words of challenge, but ultimately they also heard words of comfort and hope; as Nehemiah and the Levites rightly said, and this is as true for us as it was for them: scripture, properly understood, is good news for anyone who believes.

The writer of Nehemiah describes how powerful local outsiders had been scoffing at God's people, ridiculing them for their faith, and people today scoff and ridicule: Christianity – old hat..., why bother with the Bible? Answer: it roots us; it reminds us that we too are part of a larger narrative. Just as Ezra read out Israel's history including God rescuing them from slavery in Egypt, making a covenant with them on Mount Sinai, taking care of them, and leading them safe through wilderness years, so the Bible, as we have it, is the account of how God has rescued us, has made a covenant promise to us, of eternal life to all who believe, and in the here and now, He promises His presence and His loving care to each of us, every day, leading us safe throughout our life; and perhaps that's what you need to hear today; on Bible Sunday, from the Bible: Jesus saying to you: 'I am with you always even to the very end of the age'.

What happened next in that square in Jerusalem? v12: joy, celebration, choice food and wine (again soon at St Stephen's I'm sure!), and putting their faith into practice, as Nehemiah asked them to do: so: sharing with those who had nothing, and then in the next chapter, a re-set, like a renewal of their baptismal vows, a commitment to follow God's ways

afresh. As with them, so with us: true faith leads to action, and we can always start afresh with God.

But what does that mean in more detail?

And so to our second reading: written by St Paul, probably from his Roman prison cell, concerned about the way the Colossian church was going in the wrong direction, morally and practically, as he explains earlier in the letter, but then our verses for today: so full of wisdom, and as relevant now as then: as believers at St Stephen's, we too are called to clothe ourselves, so live lives of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness etc., and above all of love, here at St Stephen's; so let's be encouraged to keep going, to live like this as a church family, and to do so at home, with our neighbours, every day – just think what Worcester would be like if everyone showed those character traits..., but we can, and all as modelled by Jesus in His life, so not doormat humility....., kindness, gentleness and love for sure, but Jesus always blended this with firm clarity of observation about anything that was contrary to God's law.

And then this from Paul to the Colossians for our theme today: let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.' 'Dwell' in us, so the word of Christ living and at home in us, us at home with His word, not just on Bible Sunday or just on Sundays, but every day, because we find our true home in God and His living word, this wonderful, faithful record of what Christ said, and dwell in us richly, because what He says enriches our lives, His words working like yeast in us, so we can mirror His words, live them out, day by day, and always in gratitude to God.

And so to our third reading: part of what Jesus said about the coming destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, but principally about the end of time and His final return, as the Son of Man, in power and with great glory, but with this for our theme today: 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away'. John begins his Gospel by

stating: 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.' Jesus was the first word, and He will have the last word too, as He predicts, and in the meantime, He's in control.

My words will not pass away...., including those words so faithfully recorded in the Gospels.

- So much of what Jesus said is clear and straightforward, but we know too that sometimes he spoke in parables, sometimes answered a question with his own question, or with a seemingly enigmatic answer... but true followers seek out and find His meaning, even if it takes time and effort, and I'm so grateful to those who help me to understand, because I need to be open to all His words.

- So much of what Jesus said is wonderfully encouraging and comforting, but we know that not all His words make for comfortable reading; after all, as the letter to the Hebrews says, His word 'is living and active; sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates, even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart'. We must choose to be open to all His words.

- And we do so because we hold on to the truth that for the believer who is open hearted to God's word, there's nothing to fear in His words; they're always true and good, always spoken for our benefit, always spoken out of love for us. We know this because we know and believe that God is love, that the One Who spoke those words is God himself on earth, utterly faithful and true.

For what it's worth, I'm really glad to be a member of one of the mid-week Bible study groups at St Stephen's. I'm also reading through the whole Bible this year and with some guidance notes to help me, something I've done before. I'm really glad that I'm doing both these things, because reading the Bible, with others, on my own, it helps me to stay grounded, helps me to hear from God, makes me better prepared to face my life with all its ups and downs. High days come, and storms

come to us all, but as Jesus said: 'the one who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice is like a man building a house who laid the foundation on rock. When the flood came, the torrent could not shake the house because it was well built.', and when I've had big decisions to make, the Bible has been such a help: as the Psalmist says: God's word is a lamp to my feet, a light for my path.

So, on Bible Sunday and in a time of 21st century economic unfairness, and of political instability and insecurity, internationally and locally, and with outsiders repeatedly mocking our faith, and so we can live our lives well:

- We have the encouragement from Nehemiah to us at St Stephen's: the Bible is for all of us; let's open it, take it off the shelf if needs be; let's read it, value it, and be open to it, and let's put His word into practice. We have the good example of Jesus and let's follow it.

- We have the call from Paul to us: may Christ's words dwell in us richly. As God said to those three disciples at the transfiguration: 'Listen to Him'.

- And we have the absolute certainty of what Matthew records: What Jesus has said is eternal, and utterly reliable, and however unsettled the future seems, personally, for our world, the Bible assures us that He is in control.

Prayers

Heavenly Father, your Word is the light we see,
a guide for our footsteps to where you are found.

To the bidding: Lord, hear us
Please respond: **Lord, graciously hear us.**

Gracious God, fountain of all wisdom,
we pray for all Christian people;
for our Archbishop's Justin Welby and Stephen Cottrell,

for our own Bishops, John Inge and Martin Gorrick,
and for all who teach and guard the faith.
May the word of Christ dwell richly in our hearts,
and knit us together in the bond of your love.

Silence

Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us.

We pray for the leaders of nations,
and for those in authority under them, praying especially this morning
for the leader of our own government, Rishi Sunak, and for Israeli
Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Give them the gift of your wisdom,
and a right discernment in all things.

Silence

Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us.

We pray for our beautiful city and for all who either live in this parish
or belong to the community of St. Stephen's;
for those who live, work and visit here,
and for all who seek the common good.

Speak your word of peace in our midst,
and help us to serve one another as Christ has served us.

Silence

Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us.

We pray for those who do not believe,
and for those of hesitant belief.
Open their ears to hear your voice,
and open their hearts to receive you, the very Word of life.

We pray for those who are denied access to scripture
and give thanks for those who work to take the bible into difficult
places.

Silence

Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us.

We pray for those bowed down with grief, fear or sickness.
From our own community we pray especially for Anuwat Wanggane,
Alan Coe, Sam and Andy Fellows, Jack Tubby, Stacey Pearce,
Michael Orton, Roger Jones, Patricia Ash, Jo Bunn, Jason Thomson,
Ryan Day, Bryan Plester, Brenda Hulland, David New,
and Adrina and Alan Price.

And in a moment now,

we lift before you those on our own hearts this morning.

May Christ your living Word bring them comfort and healing.

Silence

Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us.

We give thanks for all who have died in the faith of Christ,
remembering the recently departed and all who mourn their loss.

We remember with love and gratitude those whose anniversary of
death falls at this time: Harold Warren, Val Phillips,
Ruth Cornock-Taylor, Joan Harper.

And we remember too all those we love but see no longer.

May they rest in peace and rise in glory.

Silence

Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us.

Lord, how sweet are your words to the taste,
sweeter than honey to the mouth.

How precious are your commands for our life,
more than the finest gold in our hands.

How marvellous is your will for the world,

unending is your love for the nations.
Our voices shall sing of your promises
and our lips declare your praise for ever and ever.

Merciful Father

accept these prayers

for the sake of your Son

our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen.