

A Sermon by Richard Shreeve for Bible Sunday, 25th October 2020

Today's reading from Nehemiah illustrates a rather different view of scripture and one that should challenge us as Christians, especially on this Bible Sunday.

Unless one has thought much about Old Testament history it is easy to assume that the Jewish nation simply continued in Israel from the time of Moses until the time of Jesus. In fact nothing could be further from the truth. About 500 years before the birth of Christ, Israel was a weak and divided nation and Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, invaded Jerusalem, broke down its walls, destroyed the first Temple and took the majority of the population away into captivity. Only the poorest were left to inhabit the ruins of a 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.

The book of Nehemiah tells the story of the rebuilding of Jerusalem by the returning exiles and today's reading from Chapter 8 is the moving account of people's reaction when they hear the scriptures read aloud. In v.3, first they listened attentively as the law of Moses was read and explained to them. 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. Also 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, as I said is Bible Sunday, which is promoted by the Bible Society. I have spoken before of my trips to Uganda and an incident that happened on one of those trips is totally relevant to Bible Sunday. On Sundays as we were not working, we could have a lie in until seven thirty and then have breakfast. After about ten o'clock we would attend a local church service if there was one nearby, if not we would have a service in our mess tent. Afterwards the rest of the day was yours to do as you liked. Most sat about relaxing and enjoyed doing nothing but chatting or reading a book. This particular afternoon an old man, very poorly dressed approached me and greeted me with the traditional Ugandan greeting of "Oliochee Asabo" which translated as How are you sir. I replied Gendie Asabo which was "I am fine sir" Then in English (which was quite a relief as my Ugandan was quite limited) said "I want a Bible, I want to read the Word Of God before I die." I told him all the Bibles written in Ugandan had been distributed and I was sorry there were none left. He looked very sad and then said "I can read English". I told him to just wait a minute and went into our accommodation and fetched my Bible. I opened it and handed it to him and asked him to read a few verses, as the print was small, which he did. I stopped him and said "Take it. It is yours to keep," to which he replied, "I can now die a happy man."

This incident is almost a carbon copy of how the Bible Society was formed. A bookshop owner Thomas Charles was so touched by a young girls struggle to get a Bible, that in 1804 he started the Bible Society to try and make Bibles available to as many people as possible.

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, 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 for 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.

When thinking about the Bible, do you think about it as another book to read when you can find time, 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? What do we need to encourage us to re-engage with the written word of God – to rescue us from being cultural Christians in exile and to bring us back to the heart of our faith? ... simply read your Bible.

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. I always ask Phil to send the reading I am asked to preach on some four weeks in advance. This is to give me plenty of time for preparation. But we are not living an underground faith – there are thousands of resources out there to help us read our bibles regularly and prayerfully and to help us understand them.

Today's Gospel reading is the conclusion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 7: 24 ***“Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.”***

Remember, this is Jesus speaking at the end of His sermon. When Jesus says, “these words of mine,” He’s talking about all of His words from the Sermon on the Mount; everything that’s been said in Matthew chapters 5 through 7. This passage is very appropriate for the conclusion of His sermon. It’s crucial that we catch the fact that Jesus doesn’t say that we are wise if we merely hear His words. He doesn’t say we are wise if we read or study or preach His words. What He does say is the person is wise, ***“who hears these words of mine and acts on them.”*** We must be obedient to what Jesus has told us!

He then gives us a metaphor of what this obedience is like. This obedience is like a wise man who built his house on a solid rock foundation. The rock foundation is what you want. The rock foundation is safe, secure, and strong. When rain, wind, and floods hit the house that is built on the rock foundation, the house will stand.

Make no mistake, the rain, wind, and floods will come! Hard times will come your way. You will encounter unexpected difficulties, like the pandemics, sudden illness, the loss of a loved one to name but a few. If your spiritual house is built on a solid foundation, it will stand. If you build your house on the foundation of Jesus and His teachings, you will be blessed! We must be obedient to Jesus! We must faithfully follow Him!

This has been the message throughout His sermon. He’s not just trying to give us a list of rules; He’s trying to make us new people because of the love of God, through the power of God, by the grace of God, and for the glory of God. He’s calling us to change. He’s calling us to choose. To be people who obey and will inherit the Kingdom of God.

Jesus is labouring the point that there are two groups of people, and both groups have been exposed to the word of God, both groups have heard the words of Jesus and what he has commanded, yet they’re distinguished by their *response* to his words. That’s why this text is particularly relevant to everyone in this room. All of you are hearing the words of Jesus, you’re being exposed to his teachings, and many of you have probably been exposed to far more than what you’ve heard thus far today. And Jesus is warning all of us here in this room, all of us who are listening to his words, that if we do not respond to him by obeying his words that we will be like “a foolish man who has built his house on the sand.” That there are disastrous spiritual consequences for those who hear the words of Jesus' but neglect to practise them.

Therefore, it isn't enough that we gather together to hear the word of God preached, it isn't enough to understand the Bible, it isn't even enough to be interested in the Bible, no, rather it's only those who hear and put into practice the words in this book who will inherit eternal life. It's only those who put into practice the words of Jesus who will enter the kingdom of heaven. Obedience is the litmus test for those of us who call Jesus our Lord. Genuine obedience is the way we *know* that we're not merely giving Jesus lip service. Are we obeying Jesus from a heart of faith, are we seeking to please him? Do our lives reflect such a reality? Amen