

Read, mark, learn

22 October 2023 *Nehemiah 8.1-4a, 8-12*
Bible Sunday *Colossians 3.12-17*
Rev. Alan Keeler *Matthew 24.30-35*

Nehemiah

This morning our Old Testament reading came from the book of Nehemiah. This has a special place in my heart. After I had become a Christian at the age of twenty someone recommended I take Bible study notes. Nehemiah was the first book these notes covered.

You may be familiar with Bible study notes. They are small books with a page for each day with a passage from the Bible and some reflections on what it means.

With Nehemiah I found myself in an ancient and foreign world. It was about a man who is living in exile. He was given the freedom to go back to his ancestral lands and restore the capital city.

I remember the tale of him mustering builders. He found opposition and had to arrange security for their work to take place. But it was not just about the restoration of buildings. In the passage we heard it was about the restoration of the national life and its culture. A place is not just where you live but how you live there too.

In our passage Nehemiah arranges for the people to gather together and for the prophet Ezra to read the Jewish Law.

Colossians

The same thing sort of takes place in our New Testament reading. Saint Paul is writing to the church in Colossae and he says:

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.

Paul thought of the people he is writing to as being brought out of the ways of their current world. Now may live the new life of Christ. To do this they must learn together, celebrate their freedom and forgiveness, and be transformed into citizens of heaven.

Conversion

I spoke about becoming a Christian at the age of twenty. I had had my interest and curiosity aroused by some friends who said that become Christians. I started to read the New Testament I had been given when I was at school. I found

reading the New Testament to be a very rich experience.

There were words of great inspiration which covered love, forgiveness, hope and the promise of eternal life. Some of it I was familiar with. Many of the parables of Jesus are widely known in our society and had been known by me. There were passages that were very challenging such as miracles and I did not know how much are these I would have to believe. There were other passages which will quite fantastic with very dramatic heavenly scenes not least in the Book of Revelation. I did not understand what type of writing these were.

But there was something more about reading the Bible. I later heard someone describe this as 'it isn't so much you puzzling the Bible out as the Bible puzzling you out'. Quite frequently I could not just observe what I was reading. The words spoke deeply to me. I was encouraged and challenged. Reading the Bible strongly demanded an answer from me.

In this way for me, the Bible was a very different sort of book. It was as if I hadn't discovered Jesus before. He mattered in a way that I could not put down. I wasn't just finding out things to do with him. I was being invited to know him as a person.

I have always liked the words that are found in the introduction to many of the books that CS Lewis wrote:

In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God... perhaps the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.

I don't think I was as reluctant as Lewis and certainly not as eloquent. But it was as if becoming a Christian was not just about me forming an opinion. I had been invited. I was offered a relationship and the Bible was very much the place where the courting took place.

Discipleship

The life of faith finds much inspiration in reading the Bible. But simply accepting the life of Christianity is only the beginning. There is the image of new birth, faith is something that is to grow, the life that we find is to develop and become distinctive and fruitful.

As time passes we are invited to continue to read the Bible so that we are nurtured and nourished. We face fresh situations with guidance and strength that meets the new demands. This is not

expected to be a solitary task. We live in a world that expects the things of faith and spirituality to be a private matter. But the Bible doesn't think of it that way. The matters it describes are about the way the world should change not just finding personal comfort. The way for our faith to grow is within a company of believers. We are invited to talk with one another. To share our joys. To wrestle with our puzzles. To encourage one another and invite people to receive what we have found.

A word for today

Now it has to be said for much of the world in which we live the Bible doesn't have this power for people. In fact it is considered an ancient text which is interesting if you like that sort of thing.

In the last few centuries there have been great strides in understanding the world in which we live and the description given by the Bible seems quaint at best. Some people threatened by this have said we all to receive the Bible literally. There is a fundamentalism that at its extreme says the world was made in seven days. But there is no need for this defensiveness and much of truth and wisdom to be found.

Our modern world as a very powerful way to describe the physical realm. It does seem a sleight of hand on their behalf to say that this success means that everything else in the Bible can be dismissed. The Bible is deeply interested in what it means to be human, how we act with justice, what it means to respect all people, the trouble wrought by slavery empire and war. All still very current issues.

The Bible can be quite graphic about the cruelty and violence humans go in for. In fact one missionary to the Germanic tribes in the dark ages said he didn't want to translate the Book of Judges because they knew enough about that already. Something that could easily be said about our day and age. The Bible is still very realistic about the human condition.

The life of God

There can be a way in which we seem to be in a place of opposites. The Bible is good, the world around is bad. Or science leads to truth and religion is full of superstition. Different points of views can easily be over simplifications. There is a lack of understanding of other people's thinking. There are rose tinted spectacles that people all too easily want to wear.

The interesting thing is just how self critical the writers of the Bible are. There can be great descriptions of how people of faith have fallen short. There is a realism that each person has fallen short.

I think as I was originally reading the Bible what struck me was God didn't seem to do the obvious thing. God could be full of passion about what has gone wrong but he remained loving of people and sought a way for life to be restored again.

Yes you can find descriptions of a God of wrath. Yes there are writers that will paint very lurid pictures about vengeance. But the Bible is continually wrestling with a bigger picture of God not least because God himself is wrestling with his people and his plans for the whole world.

Jesus

The writers of the New Testament are passionately caught up with how God is taking these plans forward through Jesus. They're not just wanting to shout at the world because they know they're right. They want to tell people about the person of Jesus and how knowing him begins to unlock the troubles of the world so everyone might enter into a new way of life.

It is both a huge oversimplification but also the deepest truth to ask 'what would Jesus do?' The oversimplification is to assume Jesus would do the nice, obvious, comfortable things we like. The deep truth is to take the passages about his ministry and the reflections about that activity found in the Bible and develop a well informed opinion.

But this is never to be just a matter of ideas or justifying a point of view. We do this to encounter Jesus himself and to live his life in ways that are distinctive and fruitful.

Read, mark, learn and inwardly digest

The collect for this Sunday invites us to 'read, mark, learn and inwardly digest'. We are to be active in making the Bible part of our lives. So which passage should we start with?

One answer is to ask ourselves because we will all have something that is a treasure to us. Let its value not fade.

For me I have always prized Paul saying 'for there is now therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Romans 8.1) We are to look in the mirror and love ourselves because no matter what happens that is how God looks at us.