

Over the coming weeks the scriptures to be read at each service have been chosen by those preaching and my request is that they choose a scripture that has spoken powerfully into their lives.

It might be something that changed the whole direction of life, it might be something they live with each and every day. It may be a reading they return to again and again because it has a resonance with them more than other passages. It will be fascinating to hear what they choose and say about it.

I've chosen today's readings because they have been mine (so to speak) for nearly 40 years.

Aged 20 I was at a rebellious stage. I left my parents church and started going to another church! That's it. That's the extent of my rebellious youth. Some people drift away from church and on their return later may have things they regret. I have things I regret to be sure...but I didn't do the drifting away thing.

The church I went to was an Assemblies of God Pentecostal church and it was lively, with a young pastor...not that much older than I was at the time. Lots of the students went there and my wife Katherine was one of those students.

Back then I played a 5 string Bluegrass banjo, I ran the youth group (although the same age as some of the students) and I was mentored by the Pastor.

It was the Reverend Keith Speck who first asked me the question, "what is God saying to you"?

No-one had asked me that before. No-one had told me that God would speak to me directly. I'd heard sermons that had a very direct impact...you probably have had the same, it's as if the preacher is speaking directly to you. But no-one had said that God would speak to me. Personally.

I didn't know how that might happen.

The Assemblies of God Pentecostal church used the gifts of the spirit in every meeting. A prophecy perhaps or someone would speak in tongues and another would interpret. But no-one had prophesied about me or over me. Even though I lacked experience I was a little cautious about one Christian speaking into another Christian's life, particularly if that person was immature or new to the faith. Great care has to be taken.

When I asked how I might know what God was saying to me I was given the blindingly obvious answer. I had to listen.

But what do I do – I asked?

It was recommended that I take myself off to the mission hut they owned, it was on the way to the Langdale Valley, and spend an evening in prayer and to take my bible and respond to God's Spirit. I wasn't sure what that meant. I knew the story of Samuel who had to learn to recognise God's voice. What would happen? Would God actually speak in a voice to me???

So I went. I may have taken my bluegrass banjo to sing worship songs but I can't remember if I did, I do remember taking my reasonably new NIV bible. Here it is. These days I rarely use a paper bible, I use the one on my iPad...back then it was one of these.

I knew my bible quite well – that is to say I knew the OT stories of Adam and Noah, David and Jonathan, Daniel and his lions den...Jonah. I knew the Gospels and some other parts of the NT but I didn't know my bible really well. I hadn't read Isaiah or Jerimiah or the little books of the minor prophets.

At some point that evening a scripture reference came to my mind. Isaiah 61.

I knew where the book of Isaiah was and had I been pushed I could probably have found the bit we read at Christmas time (it's chapter 9) but I really didn't know the rest.

I found myself reading

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,^[a]
² to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour

I wrote the reference down. I might have copied out some of the text. I'm not sure I had heard that scripture before. It's a mission statement. Because the Lord has anointed whoever this is about, they have a mission to proclaim good news, bind up the broken-hearted and so on.

But I really wasn't sure what that meant. If this was God – what was God saying to me?

I carried on in prayer and another scripture reference came to mind. I can't emphasise enough, I didn't know my bible that well. I could find things...eventually, but the only references I knew off by heart was John 3:16, Psalm 23 was the one about the Shepherd.

So into my head pops Luke chapter 4 and I looked that one up too. By verse 14 I'm reading the same words I read in Isaiah chapter 61.

I had no idea the OT passage was quoted by Jesus in the NT – none whatsoever. And the fact that the two scripture references that came to mind were ones I didn't know and were the same words left me somewhat breathless and mind-blown.

What did that mean? I felt as if Jesus had rolled up the scroll and handed it to me. It was if he'd said "take this...this is what I want you to do". At least, that's how I felt to begin with. Over the years I came to realise I'm joining in what God is already doing.

Like the old saying. The God of the Church doesn't have a mission. Our God of mission has a church.

That evening changed the course of my life. It was probably 1982 and I went to train for ministry in 1998 sixteen years later by which time we were married and we had three children, but the call to a vocation in ministry was always there in the background.

I believe God speaks to us. Bearing in mind what I've just said that might seem a little obvious, but not just once to set you on the path of a vocation, God longs to be in relationship and dialogue with us. He speaks to us in many ways and will, in my experience, reinforce what he is saying however he can.

For me it is often through scripture, but that's by no means the only way. If you are not reading scripture then the avenue is closed to you...so the habit of reading God's word is a good discipline and anchor.

God speaks through song lyrics, through nature, through what other write, through conversation through whatever means He can find to get your attention, if you have a mind to pay attention and ask, what are you wanting to say to me Lord?

What is God saying to you? Is he unsettling you to be ready to hear something new? Is he opening you to new things you had never considered? Is he leading in an unexpected direction? Has it all gone silent and does God seem very very distant?

Are you poor, or broken-hearted or feel trapped and imprisoned. I've good news for you.

There's a Saviour who gives his life for you and too you and will set you free.

Isaiah 61 and Luke chapter 4 are more than just a signpost to send me into the vocation I have, they resonate very deeply indeed. The passages are all about freedom, and freedom is a passion for myself and others.

The God of mission who has a church, sent his Son to set us free.

Rev. Jon Hutchinson, 4 September 2022