

Changing Lives, One Reader at a Time.

Readings: Nehemiah 8:1-8 (Authorised KJV), Matt 21:23-27 (ESV or NIV) & Mark 7:1-13 (Kiwi Bible p 37 -38)

Did you make New Year's resolutions this year?

Have you broken them already?

Every year I resolve to make a plan to read the Bible right through in a year – and every year I fail miserably. Last year I got as far as the middle of Isaiah before I gave up, mainly I think because I had got so far behind I got discouraged. I mean when you get that far behind, do you start where you left off or at the reading for that day and miss out on so much? Isaiah is just over halfway through the Bible – and yes, I feel guilty about it. I could excuse myself by pointing out that I study short passages of the Bible in depth when I am preparing a sermon, but, as a Christian, I feel that I should be able to stick to a plan that enables me to read right through the Bible in a year. I have tried setting aside a certain time of the day for Bible reading, but that didn't work because I have such an irregular pattern to my week. I have tried The Word for Today and Our Daily Bread programmes, the Chronological Bible, a Study Bible, and just beginning at the beginning and reading a little bit at a time depending on how much time I have – and to be quite truthful, how interesting that passage is – but nothing seems to work for me. I envy Ron's ability to get up early to read the Bible and the time he puts into not just reading it, but checking out references too, and I envy him his Bible knowledge, but I'm not a morning person and I need more sleep than he does.

I know someone that reads right through the Bible 4 times every year and that makes me feel even more guilty.

As a Christian I know how important it is to become familiar with God's Word and I would never encourage someone to skip reading the Bible, so I am challenging you all to begin a "read – the - Bible- in –a – year- programme" if you haven't already done so. This year I have chosen a programme that gives readings in chronological order and I am using my ESV Study Bible. That won't be so easy because it is a bit big to take when you go on holiday but I will concede and take a smaller Bible on those occasions and in the meantime, in my Study Bible, when I get to a passage that I don't understand, then I can read the notes at the bottom of the page to help me understand it better. So

far I am on track but there is still 11 more months of the year to go. But the really weird thing is that I feel much better for it. I feel closer to God – I feel his presence in a more tangible way, and I have noticed that I am more relaxed, cope with pressure better. Some people might say co-incidence but I don't think so because when I got behind with my reading earlier this month – which I did, not just once but twice,- already! - I lost all that, and as soon as I caught up again, it all came back.

So, this message isn't for you, it is for me. A reminder to myself to encourage me to really stick at reading the Bible in a year and now I am going to share with you why this is so important.

Do you remember your first Bible? Mine was a little blue KJ one with black and white photos in the middle of it that had had colour added. Remember those pictures? I must have read it even though I found the language hard to follow, because it got so dilapidated I threw it away. Do you know, I have regretted that ever since and if I ever came across one like it at a book fair I would buy it solely for sentimental reasons. In our house there are now several Bibles of different translations from an Authorised King James one to the Kiwi Bible.

Which brings me to today's readings.

I specifically asked for today's readings to come from 3 different versions, first the KJ, then a popular contemporary version of the readers choice and finishing with the Kiwi Bible, because different translations speak to different people.

I see some people smiling and others frowning, so before you brand me a heretic or get up and walk out, let me explain.

Some of you older ones will cling to your KJ Bible because you love the language in it. It is what you have always read and you are not tempted to change and that is just fine. I'm not suggesting for a minute that you give it up.

When I first started work at Holy Trinity four years ago, I began attending the Wed morning service which uses the 1662 liturgy. It was certainly different and I struggled to understand much of it, but when we got to the line which said, "it is meet and right and our bounden duty," I stopped in my tracks. (stop and

look up) Meet, right and bounden duty! It took me a while to get my head around that one!

But there are people here that love that service, some of them even know it off by heart – which is why the leaders sometimes mix it up a bit.

By the way, *meet* in this context means “proper, correct, or suitable” and *bounden duty* means “must be done” or “obligatory”.

Others of you will prefer a more modern version and have probably at least 2 different Bibles you use. There are many good, modern translations available today and it can be hard to choose between them. Personally I use the ESV (English Standard Version) for most of my reading because it is a Study Bible and I can look up anything I don't understand just by reading the notes at the bottom of the page, but when it comes to preaching, I compare the passage in 3 different versions and usually drift towards the GNB because I know the language used in it is relatively easy to understand and I try to keep my message as simple as possible. I was taught in my Preaching course to always aim my message at the person in the congregation with the least understanding and because I have no idea who that might be, I imagine we have a visitor who has absolutely no Bible knowledge but has just come in off the street. Hence my use of the GNB so often.

And then there is the Kiwi Bible.

Some of you are squirming in your seat at the very thought of it, but there is a place for it. The first time I heard it was when I was a student at BTC. I used to go to Loaves and Fishes for lunch when my timetable allowed it and one day, after a period when I hadn't attended for a while, the vicar at the time, Murray Cotter, came to give his usual Bible reading and say grace. Up till then the men there would fiddle with their cutlery or mutter under their breath, but this day, they put down their knives and forks and turned their attention to him. I had no idea what was coming and assumed they were waiting for Murray to make some sort of announcement that was important to them. Instead, Murray read from the Kiwi Bible and the men hung on his every word. The language it used spoke to them.

I used to use it sometimes when teaching girls from Salisbury School because they could relate to it.

Susan uses it to read from at LOH just before she says grace. There are people there who would be uncomfortable with the Bible and switch off if it was read,

but this version makes them chuckle and they look forward to it. Hopefully they will also remember some of the messages in it.

The Kiwi Bible is also a good one to give to your grandchildren if they don't attend church. It is by no means a Study Bible but it speaks their language and it is something they might well read. As an introduction to a fuller version, it does have its place.

Each of today's readings give examples of occasions when the Bible was read. When the book of Nehemiah was written, the Jewish community was struggling to maintain their identity as the people of God as they faced pressures both internally and externally. They lived in and around Jerusalem but their position was insecure because they had recently returned from 70 years in exile and so returned as strangers in their own land.

As well as that, they struggled with the challenges of needing to stay a distinctive people faithful to God. We struggle with that today too, trying to live Christian lives in a secular community, so we should be able to relate to that.

When Ezra arrives he is horrified at the way the people have drifted away from God's laws and embraced the laws of the land they have returned to.

When Ezra reads the Law to the people of Israel in our reading from Nehemiah, he began reading at dawn and continued reading until noon while they all listened attentively. They would not have had their own copies like we do today, so that was how they learned scripture, by listening at public readings, usually in the Temple. And the Levites explained the readings to the people, moving among them ensuring that all could understand what was being read. It would have been read in small sections to allow time for teaching.

In both Ezra and Nehemiah we are told that the Book of the Law was read solemnly and the Mosaic Law was once again made prominent, since it is trust in God and obedience to God's Word as revealed through Moses that is essential to the life of a community. They understood the importance of hearing God's word even back then.

Then the passage from Matthew begins with Jesus teaching in the temple. He spoke with such authority, yet had no formal training, which is why the chief priest and elders queried his credentials, but of course, that just revealed Jesus' true identity. This passage is followed by a series of parables that show

God's judgement on the leaders for not encouraging the people to accept Jesus' teachings. Today, we don't *need* to have the formal training - although that definitely helps - because we all have God's Word readily available to us. We don't need to go to the temple to listen to Scripture read because we can pick up our own Bible and read it for ourselves. Don't get me wrong, we still need to go to church to hear the word preached because we all learn more about God's Word from that, and we also get to worship God in song and prayer, and fellowship with other believers. Attending church helps strengthen us in our faith.

The passage from the Kiwi Bible again has Jesus standing up to the Pharisees and teachers of the Law as he accuses them of putting aside God's commands and obeying human teachings. In other words, they have put aside God's Word in favour of their own rules. He says – in the GN translation, “You have a clever way of rejecting God's laws in order to uphold your own teachings..... in this way the teaching you pass on to others cancels out the Word of God.”

In this way the teachings you pass on to others cancels out the Word of God. Scary thought isn't it?

That short quote, my friends, sums up the importance of reading God's word until we become so familiar with it, we can quote it when we are faced with wrong theology.

It is so easy to slip into secular thinking and ways because that is what everyone else does, but it takes courage to cling to Biblical truths in this day and age. And no matter how much courage we might have, if we don't know what the Bible actually says, we have no chance of knowing the difference between what God says and what the world around us says.

Susan, John, Ron and I experienced that very thing last weekend when we helped at a Christian stand at the Evolve Festival. It is a place where people search for understanding of life's big questions, but they are looking in all the wrong places. Clairvoyants, tarot readers, crystal ball gazers, are perhaps some of the things you may have heard of, but there are many other really strange and evil things there.

And people go there searching for answers.

That is why we went there. To tell them the good news about Jesus, but it is hard to know how to go about it. How do we draw people to our stand? How do we start up conversations? How do we draw people into a relationship with the one true God in a place like that?

To start with, we prayed – a lot. We prayed during the planning sessions, and before the festival began, we prayed on the Saturday morning about the time it started and again at noon on the Sunday. We are also going to be following it up with prayer, too.

This year our stand displayed a giant print out from Colossians that began, “He is the image of the invisible God.” And went on to explain a few basic facts about Jesus. We were all encouraged to read the script daily to make ourselves familiar with it and to look up any parts of it we didn’t understand so we could speak confidently about the text. We knew from last year’s experience that it is a dark place. But we also know it is an amazing opportunity to speak to people that we would otherwise never meet.

Your prayers for the Holy Spirit to be with us were greatly appreciated.

So, how is your Bible reading going this year? If you don’t have a plan, I have printed off a selection of different plans and copies at the back of the church if you want one, but Our Daily Bread and Word for Today are just fine too. Start at today’s date or you might get discouraged trying to catch up.

Remember, if we don’t know what the Bible actually says, we really do have no chance of knowing the difference between what God says and what the world around us says. May that be encouragement to us all, but especially me, to keep to a reading the Bible in a year plan.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we are frail creatures and often find it difficult to follow you in ways we know we should. Help us to be a people of your Word, Lord. Help us to keep to a reading programme that enables us to read the Bible right through in a year. Help us also to understand what we read there so that we may be more effective when we talk about our faith with others. Use our reading of your Word to lead us into an ever-deepening relationship with you so our faith continues to grow stronger day by day. We ask this in the name of Jesus.