

Transformed by the Word

Readings: Nehemiah 8:1-12 & 2 Timothy 3:10 – 4:5

Prayer

Father, may these *spoken* words be faithful to the *written* word and lead us to the *living* word. Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Good morning everyone. Today we are continuing our series on what church is all about – why do we get together each week, why do we do what we do in our services? As Anglicans we there is a section of our service called the Ministry of the Word (Morning and Evening Prayer) or the Proclamation (Eucharist/Holy Communion) which includes Bible readings, a sermon and the Creed and that is what we are going to focus on this morning. We are going to ask what relevance the Bible a collection of ancient texts, stories, poems and letters can have for us today. We live in an age when we are bombarded with information and misinformation, with facts and alternative facts but books, the written word are no longer a dominant resource. So, where does the Bible fit and how can studying it help us to pursue our mission statement: Following Jesus; building community?

The Bible as you probably know is a collection of books, 39 in OT and 27 in NT, the first ones written about 3,500 years ago and the last one written around 95 AD. But it is not just a collection of ancient stories, poems and letters written by people who lived a long time ago. Throughout the Bible we hear it described as the Word of God, and in our NT reading Paul describes it as inspired, literally - ‘God-breathed.’ Now, that is not to say that the Bible was dictated by God in the same way that, according to Moslems, the Koran was dictated by Allah to Mohammed. Instead God used many different human authors to communicate what He wanted to say. As Peter says: “... prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” 2 Peter 1:21. Nevertheless, the ultimate author is God.

When we describe the Bible as God’s Word that has some quite significant implications for what we believe about God and about ourselves. Not only are we saying that God exists, but also that he has chosen to communicate to us, to speak to us, to get involved in our lives. It is not so much that ‘the truth is out there,’ and we have to find it, but rather that the truth out there – God – has chosen to make himself known to us. He has done this through the stories, poems and writings preserved in the written word that we call the Old Testament, and also in the Gospel stories and teachings of the NT which tell us about Jesus, the Living Word and this remains the cornerstone of our faith. It is why we continue to have Bible readings each week.

The Jews were very conscious of the honour and privilege of being entrusted with God’s Word (Romans 3:1-2). They delighted in it. Psalm 119: 103 – “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth.” V111 – “Your statutes are my heritage for ever; they are the joy of my heart.” In a synagogue service, when the time came to read the Scriptures, the scrolls were taken out of their special container and the worship leader would parade through the congregation inviting everyone to dance in their honour. When we were in Canterbury Cathedral a few years ago, before the Gospel was read it was lifted up and carried in procession around the church accompanied by all the clergy in their fine robes and the thurifer, swinging the censer and enveloping us all in clouds of incense. Now, I’m not a great one for ‘bells and smells,’ but it did add to the occasion and make us realize that something of significant importance was about to happen – the reading of the Gospel, God’s good news for us all. Here at Holy Trinity in our first service we usually stand for the Gospel reading,

but I wonder what is going through our minds, do we have that same sense of wonder and anticipation? It makes, “Can we have the Bible readings, please?” sound a bit underwhelming!

You know Gandhi once said of the Bible: **“You Christians look after a document containing enough dynamite to blow all civilisation to pieces, turn the world upside down and bring peace to a battle-torn planet. But you treat it as though it is nothing more than a piece of literature.”**

The writer to the Hebrews tells us that “The word of God of God is alive 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.” (Heb 4:12). How many of us fully appreciate the power that lies in these pages? Cranmer did and that is why he included a section for the ministry of the Word in both morning and evening prayer, ie twice a day, and he also organised a pattern of readings, the lectionary so that all the psalms were read each month, most of the OT was read in a year and the NT was read through twice a year. We continue the tradition in our NZPB. Moreover, the compilers of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer were quite clear about why this was important and what their aims were: – that the congregation might be “stirred up to godliness”, and “tend to the preservation of peace and unity in the Church.” They believed that hearing God’s Word on a regular basis would impact the way people lived, both as individuals and as part of the church community. So how does this part of our service – the Bible readings, the sermon and the Creed, relate to our mission statement: Following Jesus; building community. Let’s take building community first.

Building Community

Well, telling stories has always been an important part of building a common identity. We may think of tribal stories told round the campfire at night, or the importance to Maori of making connections through their whakapapa, or more recently, the retelling of wartime experiences that often form part of our ANZAC Day commemorations. As Christians we also share our experiences. Paul encourages the Christians in Colossae: “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another through psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.” (Col 3:16)

In our first reading from Nehemiah we see how the community was brought together around God’s Word. To put it into context, the Jews had just returned from a lengthy exile in Babylon and had begun to settle down again when Ezra calls them all together to a public reading of the Book of the Law, probably the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. They would hear about their tribal history in the stories of their ancestors, Abraham Isaac and Jacob, of the exodus from Egypt led by Moses, and the covenant that God had established with them at Sinai.

In a similar way, one of the things that we are doing as we hear our Bible readings is reminding ourselves again of our own common heritage and of the metanarrative or big-picture story that we identify with. This becomes all the more important as the world around us increasingly rejects the Christian world-view and chooses to live within the world view of scientific materialism. – that there is no God to be accountable to; there is no ultimate purpose or meaning in the universe; we are merely the products of evolutionary processes; and we make our life choices based on the belief that this life is all there is. The story we read in the Bible stands in stark contrast to all that.

The Bible is not just a quaint religious text that some people find helpful; it reveals the deepest truths about God and about humanity. It is his word for all people at all times, in all places and in whatever situation they find themselves in. In story after story we see people struggling with their faith, suffering injustice and oppression, grief and loss, and we see how God interacts with them. We see how God reacts when Abraham doubts, not by hauling him over the coals and telling him what a bad believer he is, but by cutting a most binding covenant with him. (Gen 15) We see Jonah given a second chance when the word of God comes to him a second time. (Jonah 3:1) In Exodus we see the oppressed Israelites freed from Pharaoh's power after they cried out to God. We see the struggling Christians John is writing to in Revelation given encouragement through John's visions which are not so much about end times as revealing what's really going on. God is the one on the throne, not the Roman Emperor (or indeed any oppressive world power or system). And there will come a time when all wrongs will be righted and those who persevere/hang in there will get to experience life in a renewed heavens and earth.

Every time we are in danger of getting drawn in to stories that are at odds with God's story we can remind ourselves of the Bible stories, the deep realities of God's love for us, Jesus' promise to be with us always and the Spirit's presence changing us into the people God intends us to be.

But we learn something else from the reading in Nehemiah. The ordinary people needed the Levites, experts in the law, to explain it to them. There is great value in reading the Bible in community with trustworthy people around to help us understand it. - How many of you know that you can't always trust everything you read on the internet?! - And reading the Bible is a challenge simply because the Bible belongs to a time and place very different to our own 21st century western culture. Not only that but we miss a lot of what is going on because we don't appreciate the background or context of the passage we are looking at. I always tell my students that the first three rules of biblical interpretation are context, context, context! It is helpful to know what was going on when was the passage was written and why it was written before we try to apply it to our situation today. I also like what Rob Bell says in his book: *What is the Bible?* that we should not read the bible literally but literately – in other words we need to recognize what we are reading, the genre if you like. Is it straightforward narrative or poetry? Is the writer using symbolic language, which happens a lot in Revelation, or exaggerating for effect? Dig deeper, Bell says (What about the Equip courses that are on offer see the Pews News).

In NT times. The letters of Paul and others would have been read aloud when the church met together. They would have been sent by a messenger who could explain the difficult parts – wouldn't that have been handy. Today, as individuals, we have access to all sorts of resources, on-line as well as print, but we still follow the model of Bible reading in community followed by an explanation or drawing out of its meaning and application to our own circumstances: the readings are followed by the sermon. We are very blessed in this church to have preachers, Susan and others, who put a lot of time, effort and prayerful thought into preparing this part of the ministry of the Word. [It would be nice to think that after the sermon v 12 would happen: "Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them." But perhaps that is too much to expect!!]

Following Jesus

So far we have been talking mostly about the way in which the, reading of the Bible and the sermon which follows, has a place in building us into a community of God's people with a shared story. Now I want to turn to the first part of our mission statement: Following Jesus.

As a Jewish boy, Jesus would have gone to the synagogue school and would have been immersed in the Scriptures. His preaching and teaching were permeated by them: he quotes from Deuteronomy when he is tempted by Satan in the wilderness; he frames his ministry in words taken from Isaiah 61:1-2; as he hangs on the cross his thoughts turn to Psalm 22 which begins: "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" and which ends with the triumphal declaration: "It is finished!" Then on the Emmaus road he explains to the two travellers the things about himself throughout the whole Bible.

As followers or disciples of Jesus we face the challenge not only of being familiar with the Scriptures but of letting them mould and shape our lives, our values and attitudes, the way we think and feel about everything. Paul tells us not to allow the world around us to shape us, to squeeze us into its mould so that we come out looking like it thinks we should, but instead we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds – to learn how to think differently. In our NT reading from Timothy we heard how from infancy Timothy had known the Holy Scriptures that "are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." And Paul adds: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.: 2 Tim 3:15-17.

The Bible is a very practical book. Salvation is not just concerned with forgiveness of sins so that we can look forward to life in the age to come, but it is also about being loosed or set free from sin (our weaknesses and hang-ups as well as our tendency to live self-centred lives) so that we can become the people God created us to be. Listen to the Message version of Romans 8:29: "God knew what he was doing from the very beginning. He decided from the outset to shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son. The Son stands first in the line of humanity he restored. We see the original and intended shape of our lives there in him."

One very important way in which God does his transforming work in us is through his word. Sometimes it is through the steady repetition of truths which as we hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them become part of us, our way of thinking and being. Sometimes there may be light-bulb moments as the Spirit makes certain Scriptures come alive. Every time we listen to what the Bible has to say we open up ourselves to the possibility of change.

So, I hope that in the future we can approach this part of our service with anticipation - even if we don't get up and dance around! May we look to be transformed by the Word as we encounter the One who stands behind the stories of Scripture; the God who already loves us and who is reaching out to us in many different ways and who is with us as we seek to follow Jesus and build community here at Church on the Hill. Amen.