

Epiphany 3 C    St Stephen's 9.30 & 11    Neh 8:8 Lk 4:16b  
24.1.16

“So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense so that the people understood the reading.”

“(Jesus) stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him.”

How closely do you follow the prayer for the Church in the BCP Holy Communion Service? It is extremely well crafted and repays listening to carefully as it is read by the priest. In particular, the part which says:

“And to all thy people give thy heavenly grace; and specially to this congregation here present; that, with meek heart and due reverence, they may hear, and receive thy holy word; truly serving thee in holiness and righteousness all the days of their life.”

“That they may hear, and receive ...” That’s the key. We hear all sorts of things which simply go in one ear and out of the other. But when we hear God’s word, we ask that we may not only hear, but receive it so that it bears fruit in our lives. This is the focus of today’s readings.

The OT reading captures a significant moment in the life of Israel, as the Jews have returned from exile. They stand before Ezra who reads to them the Torah, the holy Law given by God through Moses all those years ago, and who added the instruction to “make them known to your children and your children’s children.” Sadly, it was because this command was neglected, it was this that led to the exile as the nation forgot or ignored the Word of God.

So Esra is reminding the returned exiles that they must be faithful in reading the Book of the Law, and that they hear it read as they meet together. The reading of the bible in public worship is of primary importance for the health and well-being of the Christian community, as it was for those returned exiles.

And it is clear that the people heard the Torah read willingly, so that they were able to respond to its teaching. Our attitude as we listen to the Bible readings is so important, for it is this which makes us receptive to its truth.

And it is important that the public reading of scripture takes place within the context of worship. For it is at this time that we are open and receptive to God and able to receive the interpretation of what is being read. The late Dietrich Bonhoeffer said: "In all speaking and acting in church I am concerned with the primacy, with the sole honour and truth of the Word of God. There is no greater service of love than to put men in the light of the truth of this Word, even where it brings sorrows."

With the gospel the scene changes to the time of our Lord, and at a service of Jewish worship in the synagogue. Jesus is handed the scroll and reads from the prophet Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free  
and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

As Jesus expounds the word he has just read, he presents himself as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy.

It was through the preaching and teaching of Jesus that the power of the Spirit can be seen, and which gave rise to the frequent observation that he "teaches as one with authority." This is also born out by the observation that "the eyes of all were fixed on him". He'd caught their attention – they were hearing and receiving the Word.

And the Word spoken by Jesus was full of hope and promise. How desperately our world needs to hear these words for the poor in the jungle at Calais long to hear good news; the captives in the cities and towns besieged in Syria

long for release; the blind politicians who rule the nations need to have the eye of their minds opened; and all those ruled by false ideologies or repressive regimes to find freedom.

And in our own society, how often do we hear the Church being disparaged, especially by those who should know better, to so called chattering classes. These people wouldn't dream of criticising Islam, or feminists, or black and coloured people; but the Church and Christians are fair game. Yet these same people are those who use the Church for Baptisms, Marriages, and Funerals, and who turn to it at moments of national crisis.

If the Word of God is to come alive in our day as it was at the time of Ezra and of Jesus, then we must open ourselves to its truth and allow this to direct our lives. When people see in us, as they saw in Jesus, the power of God's Spirit at work, there will be a response – though not always what we might expect.

A man was leading a series of meetings over one week. At the end there was an opportunity to ask questions and enter into discussion. There was only one question, from an elderly woman who had sat at the front at every meeting. She wanted to know: "Is them your own teeth?"

I expect that you have noticed the list of readings for the coming month set out in the magazine. How many of us use this to prepare for the coming service Sunday by Sunday? To read the set lessons before coming to church and spend a few minutes reflecting on them would greatly increase the value of the spoken word when it is read on Sunday.

And how many of us do a daily Bible reading? If you are still looking for a new year's resolution, well here is a good one. It doesn't have to take long, yet provides thought for the day. To read the Bible with understanding can be greatly helped by doing so with the help of Bible Reading Fellowship notes, and I'm sure we can arrange to make these available if you'd be interested.

A church leader called James Ryle was preparing to lead a training seminar. That night he had a dream and felt God was speaking to him, showing him a picture of a road with a sign and a little pig standing on the grass alongside it. He puzzled as to what this might mean. Perhaps he was wasting his time casting his pearls of wisdom before the swine of his class on the morrow. Or maybe a warning not to look at pretty girls as they would be like the gold ring in the pig's nose. But nothing made sense. So he asked the Lord to explain the picture. "Did you see the sign?" God asked him. James replied: "No, I didn't even look at it." "Then look again," said the Lord. On it was written: "Don't be distracted." Then God said: "I am speaking to my people in "road signs" all the time, but they are so distracted by the little pigs that they seldom notice what I'm saying."

So we pray "that with meek heart and due reverence, we may hear and receive thy Holy Word." That the Bible may be for all of us as the Psalmist says: that "Thy word is a lantern unto my feet, and a light unto my paths." (Ps 119: 105)