

... and Ezra Read the Scriptures

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service on 27 January 2019 by the Associate Vicar, the Revd. Wendy Wale, in Beverley Minster.

Nehemiah 8: 1 - 3, 5 - 6, 8 - 10 Luke 4: 14 - 21

All the people gathered in the square and Ezra read the Scriptures from early morning until midday- all the people stood up, they worshipped God, they wept when they heard the words of the law....Father God as we stand before you this morning, we ask that you will help us to hear and understand your word with the enthusiasm and understanding of those listening to Ezra...Amen

So, what do you think- next week, arrive with the 8am congregation, stand outside on Highgate and we'll listen to the Bible being read, whilst standing up, until lunchtime! Who'll be there? Perhaps when it's warmer?

In our reading from Nehemiah, the people respond to the reading aloud of Scripture and it's interpretation with respect (they stand up) with commitment (they stand for several hours) and with emotion (both tears and joy).

In our reading from Luke's Gospel the people also respond to the reading of Scripture, initially with enthusiasm but soon afterwards with anger and an attempt to push Jesus off a cliff.

Scripture always produces strong emotions in those who listen deeply to what it has to say- those emotions are often much deeper when accompanied by beautiful music and singing...but that's another talk!

Each of us here today will have a different experience of reading and understanding the Bible. Some will have years of reading it daily, others may have studied it at college and a few will be used to teaching and preaching regularly. For many people, they know the Bible through songs and stories taught at school or at Sunday School - and it's hard to just hear a passage on a Sunday to really know what it means, or what to do with it.

One of the things I believe we've lost is the art of listening to whole stories- read out loud with all their drama and intrigue. Huge amounts of the Old Testament is filled with the stories of God's people, the Israelites and their continual struggle to live out their faith in God. To put it simply, they had one task...to worship Yahweh, the one true God- with all their heart and mind and soul and strength... to follow His commands and live well- not to turn back to their 100s of idols and other gods. However, they didn't find this very easy and we have tale after tale of them wandering off- in the wilderness, in battles, in worship of other gods...and then God (Yahweh) calling them back.

The passage we heard from Nehemiahis a perfect example of this: the people of Israel have rebelled against God- Jerusalem is in physical and spiritual ruins and Nehemiah has realised it's all gone wrong again. He begs God to let him go to Jerusalem, rebuild the walls and then remind the people of who they are and who they belong to...

As Ezra read the scriptures and explained it them (v8) the people were reminded of their history and the command to worship the one true God and they are excited about turning back to him. How are they instructed to respond? Have a party and share what they have with the poor.....

I hope you are already picking up the links with our reading from Luke where Jesus is in the synagogue reading the Scriptures out loud and explaining them to people....at first, they are enthusiastic, amazed at his understanding....but not for long. Like the passage in Nehemiah, the response to God's call has to be lived out in practical action- v 18-19, which is nothing new.....but then Jesus drops his bomb shell, just casually as he rolled up the scroll....today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing!

So far this year we've heard about Jesus' birth, his Baptism, his first miracle at the wedding in Cana and now this public declaration of what he intends to do, his purpose...often called the Jesus Manifesto....it's a huge threat to those seeking power and status- Jesus is speaking of grace for all, good news for the poor, not just for the Jews...the radical inclusion of the gospel...

So, where does this all leave us? Firstly, I hope with a thirst to read to some of the epic passages and stories in the Bible afresh, or perhaps to listen to them read aloud- there are some great free resources on line. I am challenged to reflect on areas of my life where I've got distracted from worshipping God by the myriad of idols and diversions that intrude from every direction.

But to finish, perhaps we can reflect together on what it means for us to follow Jesus, to continue celebrating his good news (in the feast of the communion we will share shortly) and in declaring it to the poor.

All of us have times in our lives when we are poor- we may not be materially poor, but there are many types of poverty...we can be poor in spirit, poor in health or poor in relationships- when we feel lonely, far from God and broken inside. We are called to be good news to each other.

We have a prayer team who would love to meet with anyone during communion and share their burdens, to sit and bring them before God.

We have a pastoral team who visit the sick and housebound, send cards to encourage people, try and connect those in need with those who can help.

We have many small groups which meet around different interests- sewing, gardening, eating, praying, children...in homes and pubs and the parish rooms...each offering ways to connect and share good news, one with another.

Beyond the Minster community there is a whole huge world which is crying out for good news in so many different ways and places.

It's perfect timing that this morning we've been able to celebrate 4 groups that are doing just this- the LIFE club, Tickton Church, Label of Love and Beverley Schools Christian Trust- people giving their time and talents to support and encourage young people locally – to teach them the scriptures, encourage them to continue the work of Jesus, to celebrate his good news.

As a church we support over a dozen different organisations that have responded to Jesus call in specific ways- both locally and around the world. You'll be hearing much

more about them over the next few months- and we'd love to hear your stories of seeing Jesus transforming lives today. A few weeks ago Claire came to share about the work of Compassion- a chance for us to sponsor not only a child, but to invest in their community so that their future can be one that is not limited by the poverty that robs so many children of the chance to flourish. There will be more information about the children who still need a sponsor by the refreshments area- and if you'd like to sponsor a child as a homegroup or with a friend- that is also possible.

Let us be people who live good news, good news for our community, good news for our families, good news to the poor, good news for all.