

The Bible

unwrapped

turn the page...

BRF BIBLE SUNDAY

Sermon outline 'The Bible Unwrapped'

Revd Canon David Winter

Possible Outlines:

Nehemiah 8:1-4a; 8-12

The Law is read to the people and explained, evoking first tears and then joy

In the fifth century BC Cyrus, king of Persia, who had conquered Judaea and taken its leading people into captivity, relented. He ordered that the temple of God should be rebuilt and permitted the people to return to complete the task.

On their return, under the leadership of Nehemiah, the 'governor', and Ezra, a leading priest, they reinstated the Law (the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible). To ensure that the people were aware of its requirements - many of them having had no instruction in their religion during the years of exile - they arranged for a marathon reading of the whole of the Law.

It took place in the square before the Watergate (presumably a large open area), where a pulpit was erected. Then the priests and Levites, by rota, read their way all through the five books. They also explained the meaning, because their hearers were unfamiliar with the words and ideas they were hearing. Nowadays people tend to complain if the sermon exceeds 15 minutes. This reading must have taken hours and hours - but in fact the people listened spellbound.

But they did more than that. As the Word of God was read, it struck them with renewed force. If this was what God required, then they had failed miserably. The people began to weep and lament at the thought that they had so grievously neglected the sacred scriptures. But the message of Ezra and Nehemiah was more positive. 'This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep' (v. 9 NRSV). They urged them to have a great celebration, to eat and drink - and send portions of food to the poor. Everybody should share in the blessing of the day 'because they had understood the words that were declared to them' (v. 12).

There are obvious comparisons with our modern situation, where very few people have any idea at all what the Bible says or means. They too have been, in a way, living in an 'alien' culture, swamped by secularism and materialism, or just too busy to bother.

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Notes:

Obviously we can't literally emulate Ezra and Nehemiah, and have a mass public reading of the entire Bible for the nation, though we could, perhaps, like them, do more to 'explain the meaning' - for many people the Bible is simply incomprehensible.

What else could we do? What can we do as individuals to encourage people to find out what is in this most influential and life-changing of books? And what can we do as churches to reinstate the message of the Bible in the heart of our communal life?

Key points:

- The ministers read and explained the scripture.
- The people listened attentively.
- They absorbed its message.
- It led them to two responses: repentance for past failures, and celebration for present blessing.

Follow Up:

Daily reading notes help to 'explain the meaning' and encourage careful and attentive reading of the Bible. For further help in understanding, the People's Bible Commentary is an accessible and attractive resource - a paperback book for each section of the Bible.

Colossians 3:12-17

The 'Word of Christ' at work in the church community

The apostle Paul is writing to the Christian church at Colosse, a town in Asia Minor (modern Turkey), probably between 60 and 64 AD. Today's reading is a rare glimpse of the early Church in its more intimate setting - what we would call 'home meetings' or study groups. The writer to the Hebrews calls them episynagogues - 'extra gatherings'. It's picture of a warm, very human fellowship, bound together by Christian love (agape), where it is possible for people not only to teach, but also to 'admonish' (reprimand or warn) each other, without causing offence. It's good to be taught by an 'expert', but it's also true that we often learn best what we have discovered for ourselves, and that was what the Colossian Christians were doing in their home groups.

At the heart of it is what Paul calls 'the word of Christ', that is, the message Jesus brought. Undoubtedly they shared together the Gospel stories, though the Gospels as we know them weren't yet written. Probably many knew the kind of teaching we find in the Sermon on the Mount by heart, and they would have shared that and tried to apply it to their own lives. And surely the word of Christ would include the garden of Gethsemane, the cross and the garden of the resurrection. Their Bible studies would have been very rich.

And that is exactly what the apostle commanded: 'let the word of Christ dwell in you richly' (v. 16). Not reluctantly or as some kind of daily duty, they were to 'let' the word soak into them, like sherry soaking into a trifle and transforming all that dull sponge at the bottom into something rich and memorable. They were to be saturated in the word of Christ. Only in that way could the 'wisdom' of God work in their lives.

This picture of our Christian predecessors nearly two thousand years ago gives us a picture of the word of God and the message of Christ being central in the life and growth of the Church. Their meetings sound like fun, but the result was undoubtedly deeply transforming. Regularly, obediently, gladly, hopefully, they turned time and again to the one message that can offer true hope and fulfillment.

Key points:

- The context of their study was not duty but love (v. 14).
- Peace and gratitude were to be the hallmarks of their gatherings and of their common life.
- The word of Christ was to dwell in them richly, enabling them to help each other grow in faith.
- Their study was accompanied by worship and the singing of praise to God.
- All they did was to be done 'in the name of the Lord Jesus', with gratitude to God the Father.

Follow Up:

Daily Bible reading notes are a practical and attractive way of allowing the scripture to saturate our thinking. It is the regular discipline of finding time, and the availability of wise, positive help in understanding, that enables the reader to experience the infiltration (as it were) of the Bible's message into their lives.

Matthew 24:30-35

The words that Jesus spoke will outlive the earth and the skies

Either one or (if you want a long sermon!) both of those passages could be helpfully concluded with the words of Jesus in Matthew 24:35: 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.' This echoes a familiar theme of the whole Bible that the Word of God is of eternal significance. Its truths will still apply even when earth and sky have ceased to exist. It was that Word which the anxious Jews, returning from exile, heard before the Watergate. It was that Word which the Christians in Colosse studied and sang about. It is, as the Coronation Service says, 'the most valuable thing this world affords'.

Bible Sunday is a reminder to churches and Christians to give it the place, time and commitment in their lives that it requires and deserves.

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Further reading:

Chronicles to Nehemiah – The People’s Bible Commentary (PBC)

Ephesians to Colossians and Philemon – The People’s Bible Commentary (PBC)

Published by the Bible Reading Fellowship

To help you with your preparation, we have included in this pack extracts from Nehemiah and Colossians from *The People’s Bible Commentary* series. If you are unfamiliar with *The People’s Bible Commentary*, the series distils the best of scholarly insights into the straightforward language and devotional emphasis of Bible reading notes. Explanation of background material, and discussion of the original Greek and Hebrew, will always aim to be brief. If you help to lead a church study group, or are otherwise involved in regular preaching and teaching, you can find invaluable ‘snapshots’ of a Bible passage through the PBC approach. The series is designed to be used alongside any version of the Bible.

The authors:

Chronicles to Nehemiah (PBC) - Michael Tunncliffe

The Revd Michael Tunncliffe is Director of Studies for the Northern Ordination Course, based in Manchester.

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