

Ripon and Lower Dales Methodist Circuit.
Worship at Home
25th October 2020

Today is **Bible Sunday**,
an opportunity to thank God for his word to us, a
time to consider how we use the Bible in our walk
with Jesus, and a day to pray for those who do
not have the same access to Scripture or
freedom to worship as we do.

Call to Worship

Today we come to God as we are, seeking to
meet with him.

We bring to God our struggles, our stresses and
our problems, wanting to be changed by him.

We come to God to worship him in Spirit and in
truth, trusting the promise that God will meet us
when we seek him. Amen.

Hymn Your words to me are life and health

- 1 Your words to me are life and health ;
they fortify my soul
enable, guide, and teach my heart
to reach its perfect goal
- 2 Your words to me are light and truth ;
from day to day they show
their wisdom, passing earthly lore,
as in their truth I grow.
- 3 Your words to me are full of joy,
of beauty, peace, and grace ;
from them I learn your blessed will,
through them I see your face.
- 4 Your words are perfected in One,
yourself, the living Word ;
within my heart your image print
in clearest lines, O Lord.

George Currie Martin (1865–1937)

Prayer

Creator God, you spoke and the universe came
into being,
you spoke and our world was formed,
you spoke and we were formed in your image.
You sent your Son, our Saviour Jesus,
to speak among us,
to teach us through his words,
how to love one another,

and to hear how much we are loved by you.

Through the scriptures in our Bible,
we can read your Word,
enjoy meeting your chosen people,
learn more about you, our heavenly Father,
and seek to follow your way,
and obey your commandments.

Help us, Lord, to read and hear your word today,
help us to use our words wisely,
so that others may choose to read,
and seek you too. Amen.

A prayer of confession

God of all grace, we confess that we have
allowed ourselves to be conformed to the mould
of the world around us;
that our thoughts, our words and our actions this
past week have not reflected your love, your
kindness and your goodness.

Through the death of your Son, our Saviour,
Jesus Christ,
forgive us all of our sins and make us able to
stand in your presence once again. **Amen.**

Lord's Prayer Our Father ...

The Bible Society have produced some materials
for use on Bible Sunday and suggest that the Old
Testament reading should come from a minor
prophet, whom you may not be so familiar with -
Nehemiah. As I was reading, I was struck by how
his message for his people can resonate with us
today. Before we read Nehemiah 8, lets have a
bit of background.

We're back in the fifth century BC where the
Israelites have been living through a most
traumatic time. The Babylonians had destroyed
Jerusalem and most of its people were exiled far
from home, where they sat by the rivers of
Babylon and wept in a foreign land. Exile in
Babylon was tough. But now, the Persians have
overthrown the Babylonians and the exiles are
allowed to return home. So, in stages, the
Israelites return to Jerusalem and begin to

rebuild their old lives. But, if they thought exile was tough, trying to get back to a new normal amid so much uncertainty was going to be even harder.

Does that sound familiar? Lockdown was hard but rebuilding on the other side feels even more challenging.

Nehemiah is a man of God, but he's also a man of action. When he returns to Jerusalem, he stirs the people to act. The temple had been repaired, now he gets the walls of the city rebuilt so the people can feel secure again. Another man, Ezra had also returned to Jerusalem and is working with Nehemiah. But he has a different skill from God. Where Nehemiah is a man of God who can lead people to action, Ezra is a man of God who teaches. And in Nehemiah 8, Ezra gathers the people around him to hear God's word and stirs their hearts.

NEHEMIAH 8.1-10 (selected verses, NIV)

¹ All the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel. ² So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. ³ He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law ... [Then] the Levites ... instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. ⁸ They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read. ⁹ Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, 'This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep.' For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.¹⁰ Nehemiah said, 'Go and enjoy choice food and sweet wine, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.'

Hymn Tell me the old, old story

1 Tell me the old, old story
of unseen things from above,
of Jesus and His glory,
of Jesus and His love.
Tell me the story simply

as to a little child,
for I am weak and weary
and helpless and defiled.

*Tell me the old, old story,
Tell me the old, old story,
Tell me the old, old story
of Jesus and His love.*

- 2 Tell me the story slowly,
that I may take it in -
that wonderful redemption,
God's remedy for sin.
Tell me the story often,
for I forget so soon:
the early dew of morning
has passed away at noon.
- 3 Tell me the story softly,
with earnest tones and grave;
Remember I'm the sinner
whom Jesus came to save.
Tell me the story always,
if you would really be,
in any time of trouble,
a comforter to me.
- 4 Tell me the same old story,
when you have cause to fear
that this world's empty glory
is costing me too dear.
Yes, and when that world's glory
is dawning on my soul,
tell me the old, old story;
Christ Jesus makes you whole.
Anabella Catherine Hankey (1834-1911)

Reflection

Over the past few months, our lives have faced huge levels of disruption. The coronavirus has shown how fragile we really are, that we are not in control of the universe as we like to think we are and we need each other more than we realise we did. As we seek to rebuild following our time of major disruption - and with uncertainties still ahead, how can we experience spiritual renewal together? Where are the resources we need to face a brave new world with courage?

This Bible Sunday is an opportunity to reflect on these questions by gathering around the Bible with those people of Nehemiah's time in the Old Testament, and consider how they can help us in our time today. And I'd like us to consider three ways in which the Bible enables spiritual renewal:

1. (Nehemiah 8.1–3)The Bible is a watering hole

Have you ever seen animals gathering at a watering hole on a wildlife programme. The water that is so essential for life, means a great diversity of creatures, gather to quench their thirst.

After the trauma of exile and the toil of rebuilding Jerusalem, the Israelites were thirsty. They needed to drink again from the truth of God's word. So Ezra is asked to bring out the 'Book of Moses' and to read it to them. (That's the first five books of our Bible.) We don't know which sections Ezra read, but whatever the sacred Scripture chosen, they lapped it up.

Did you notice who attended this public reading of Scripture and where they gathered? Instead of inside the Temple, where only the Jewish men and older boys could go, they assembled in a public square so that everyone could come and listen – men and women, young and old. Even in our ancient past, the Bible was only for scholarly people, restrictions were placed around who could read it. There was huge anger about printing it for the masses. Yet, the Bible is a divine watering hole that gives meaning, strength and hope to thirsty souls. It speaks truth whether at home, in church, or on YouTube, and is a source of wisdom, comfort and hope for all people – young, old, male, female.

More than ever we need to offer the Bible to our thirsty world. That starts by putting the Bible at the centre of our lives. If we are to be spiritually renewed through these challenging times, we need God's word.

Perhaps you could invite others to join you in reading it together as the people did with Ezra?

2. (Nehemiah 8.5-8) The Bible offers hope

A man who worked with refugees in the Middle East, described an occasion when a shipment of clothing arrived. Having arranged the clothes in the warehouse, they also put a stack of Arabic and Farsi Bibles next to them. When the doors opened and word got round, there was a stampede... not for the clothes but for the Bibles! The refugees knew that when life is tough and fragile, the Bible is a unique source of hope.

Picture the scene as Ezra stood on a large platform to speak. Thousands gathered round and as he read from the 'Book of Moses', you could have heard a pin drop as young and old alike listened attentively.

What was it that was so captivating? Perhaps the

key for Israel was that the scripture helped them feel part of a bigger story that made sense of their current experiences. As Ezra read, he was telling Israel's history, and they were reminded how their ancestor's were rescued from slavery in Egypt at their most vulnerable time, and the people come to realise – this is our story too. They are part of something solid and certain. It gave them confidence to face their challenges knowing that God would be faithful to them too. But they still find the scripture confusing. So the Levites – the priests, went out among them 'making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read' (verse 8).

It reminds us that it's OK to struggle with the Bible. Today, we have many resources that make the Bible more accessible. The Bible Society and Scripture Union are two well known organisations providing study books and daily reading guides that can help us to engage with the Bible more, as well as our own church teaching.

I wonder ... What's your next step to become more confident with the Bible?

3. (Nehemiah 8.9–12) The Bible helps us grow true community

The Bible is surprisingly powerful. It gets under your skin and moves you in ways no other book can.

When Ezra finished reading, he realised the people had started crying. They were so emotional Nehemiah steps in to coax them out of it: 'Do not mourn or weep' ... he said, 'Go and enjoy choice food and sweet wine.'

Where did all their emotion come from?

After all the major loss, disruption and uncertainty they had lived through, and the struggle to keep going through it all, now, as the Bible was read it was like the lid was lifted. They heard words of comfort and hope. Scripture created a safe space where emotions could surface and be discussed. As a society we've been through a lot recently. We probably don't realise how much we've been holding in or the toll it's taken. Yet, in the context of community, the Bible can help us express our emotions as part of a process of healing and renewal. Colossians 3:15. says "let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts". We can help each other find that peace by sharing our experiences throughout the pandemic.

Nehemiah 8 finishes with celebration, tears of sorrow turn to food and joy. 'The joy of the LORD is your strength.' said Nehemiah. The Israelites put their Scripture into practice, shared what they

had with the poor and those in need (8.10) and experienced a new depth of community as they gathered around God's word. Over the next few months, no doubt we will have reason to cry and lament together. But eventually there will be a time to celebrate and laugh. We'll have proper coffee mornings, not just Zoom ones. And as we do so, we will discover that true community begins when we gather around God's word. Just like the Israelites lamented, we do not choose the time we live through, but we can make the most of it by gathering around God's word and experiencing spiritual renewal together. How can I do this, you may ask? I encourage you to read your Bible, perhaps beginning with Colossians 3.12-17!

(with thanks to Dr Andrew Ollerton, who provided inspirational notes on Nehemiah 8)

Prayer

Joshua 1.8 (ESV) 'This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.'

Lord God, thank you for your guidance through the Scriptures.
Help us to regularly search your word to gain more insight as to who you are and more understanding of your will for each one of us.
Give us an increasing desire to read, obey, and find nourishment through the Bible. Amen.

StF 545 Be thou my vision

- 1 Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,
be all else but naught to me, save that thou art;
be thou my best thought in the day and the night,
both waking and sleeping, thy presence my light.
- 2 Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word,
be thou ever with me, and I with thee, Lord;
be thou my great Father, thy child let me be;
be thou in me dwelling, and I one with thee.

- 3 Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight;
be thou my whole armour, be thou my true might;
be thou my soul's shelter, be thou my strong tower:
O raise thou me heavenward, great Power of my power.
- 4 Riches I heed not, nor earth's empty praise:
be thou mine inheritance now and always;
be thou and thou only the first in my heart:
O Sovereign of heaven, my treasure thou art.
- 5 High King of heaven, thou heaven's bright Sun,
O grant me its joys after victory is won;
Great Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
still be thou my vision, O Ruler of all.

Irish, 8th century

translated by Mary Elizabeth Byrne (1880-1931)

versified by Eleanor Henrietta Hull (1860-1935) (alt.)

Prayers for Others

Lord, we are thankful to you
for the gift of your Word to us.
We thank you for lives changed through the centuries as people have come to know you, the Living Word.

Lord, we are thankful to you
for your gifts of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.
We ask that we would clothe ourselves with these gifts,
that others may be blessed by them.

Lord, we are thankful to you
for your gift of forgiveness.
Help us to let go of bitterness and resentment,
and to forgive as you first forgave us.

Lord, we are thankful to you
for your gift of perfect love.
Help us to put on the virtue of love,
that you may use us to work towards perfect
unity.

Lord, we are thankful to you
for your gift of Jesus, the living Word.
We pray that as we read the Bible
and allow your Word into our hearts,
you may dwell richly in us through your Spirit.

And we pray that we may have opportunities
to share your Word with those in our own
communities, and with those around the world,

We pray for all missionary work that brings your
Word into the lives of those thirsting for comfort,
for healing, for shelter, and for translations of
Bibles into languages that mean people can read
your Word for themselves,

that your kingdom may grow here on earth.

And whatever we do, in word or deed,
may we do it in your name, Jesus Christ, in the
power of the Spirit, giving thanks to God our
Father, **Amen.**

StF 470 Lord for the years

1 Lord, for the years your love has kept and guided,
urged and inspired us, cheered us on our way,
sought us and saved us, pardoned and provided,
Lord of the years, we bring our thanks today.

2 Lord, for that word, the Word of life which fires us,
speaks to our hearts and sets our souls ablaze,
teaches and trains, rebukes us and inspires us,
Lord of the word, receive your people's praise.

3 Lord, for our land, in this our generation,
spirits oppressed by pleasure, wealth and care;
for young and old, for commonwealth and nation,
Lord of our land, be pleased to hear our prayer.

4 Lord, for our world; when we disown and doubt him,
loveless in strength, and comfortless in pain;
hungry and helpless, lost indeed without him,
Lord of the world, we pray that Christ may reign.

5 Lord, for ourselves; in living power remake us,
self on the cross and Christ upon the throne;
past put behind us, for the future take us,
Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone.

Timothy Dudley-Smith (b. 1926)

Sending out prayer

Generous God,
thank you for giving us your Word;
thank you for the way in which we are changed
as we read it and live it out.
Bless the work of organisations like the Bible
Society in taking your Word to those who do not
know it. Give courage and strength to their
workers and protect them in all that they do.
Help us to clothe ourselves with your love and
your peace in the coming week so that we
become a blessing to those we meet. Amen.

May the blessing of the Father, Son and Holy
Spirit be with you this week and always. **Amen.**

Kathy Lowrie