

SUNDAY REFLECTIONS

Sunday 25 October 2020 | Bible Sunday (*The Last Sunday after Trinity*)

TODAY'S READINGS

Nehemiah 8.1-12 | Psalm 119.6-16 | Colossians 3.12-17 | Matthew 24.30-35



'Christ in Majesty'

*Mural of the central apse originally from the church of
Saint Clement de Tahull, Catalonia, Spain
(early twelfth century)*

✚ In the name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

'...for this day is holy to our Lord; do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.'
Nehemiah 8.10

This week as I sat in my study I counted up how many Bibles I had on my shelves; old and new, big and small, lots of different translations, some well-used, others hardly-opened, gifts and purchases and others that I have simply acquired over the years, with the final total reaching over thirty. And although admitting that I've managed to accumulate so many brought me a little surprise, I was struck by how many of those Bibles carry with them special memories; that chart the progression of my years of life and faith in a way that I found strangely moving.

Whether that's the Bible that my great-grandparents gave me at my Baptism in July 1990, the Bible my great-grandmother gave me at my Confirmation in 2001, the Bibles presented to me at my Ordination as Deacon and Priest in recent years, the study Bible purchased in readiness for my theology degree, the Greek New Testament that I spent hours trying to translate, or the Bible my grandparents gave me at the start of the new millennium.

Each of those Bibles, it struck me, had been given for a definite purpose: the Bibles at my Baptism and Confirmation a reminder of the living faith that I had been called into, the Bibles at my Ordinations an encouragement to know my vocation to preach and proclaim the mighty acts of God, the Bibles given at key moments of life a focus to remember that Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, is the same yesterday, today and forever. All of them important markers to me, reflecting on thirty years of life that God's truth and God's word will always endure, appropriate for every time and season, whatever stage of life we find ourselves in or the circumstances that surround us.

I would hope the same would be true for each of us, however many Bibles we have at home, whatever translation or century they come from. A lasting memorial and witness of the belief we share together in the Lord whose purposes for the world and for each of us in Jesus are good and holy and perfect.

Yet, as we know the pages of Holy Scripture, the books that it contains, the words that inspire, challenge, alarm, perplex, puzzle, encourage and comfort are not given to sit neatly upon a shelf, or rest on a table, unread, unheeded or unnoticed. Instead, as our collect today reminds us to be read, marked, learned and inwardly digested. When we open the Bible and read from it we do not

simply come across histories, prophecies, poetry, songs, genealogies, stories, biographies or letters; but through its authors and their contexts, we discern in it and through it the living word of God, that is active and has power to transform and to heal, to console and enliven, to reconcile and restore.

The Word of God which speaks afresh in each generation, including our own, and in lives that are open to its inspiration and who seek to fashion their ways in response to its guiding. Words that when read, marked, learned and inwardly digested always have more to offer, and in the midst of the stuff of life speak continuously of our God's compassion and care.

In our reading from the book of Nehemiah we are transported to a stage in biblical history often quickly passed over, the fifth century BC, as the Israelites after their experience of exile in the foreign land of Babylon are beginning to return home to the land God had promised to them. The gradually returning beleaguered exiles are tasked with rebuilding the ancient ruins, restoring Jerusalem, and finding hope in the aftermath of intense despair. They have witnessed the collapse of all their former certainties and securities and are faced with a daunting prospect; remaking their former lives and trying to get back to normal amid what must have seemed paralysing uncertainty and acute fear. What might the future hold for God's people in a land that knew but had been exiled from for so long?

In this, we don't have to strain too much perhaps to glimpse some similarities to our experiences at the present moment. The lingering reality and sometimes crippling consequences of lockdown have been clear many in our country; emotionally, physically, mentally and spiritually, knowing from experience that it is difficult to envision a hopeful future when the realities of the day can seem overwhelming. We can all account for the effect it has had on our own lives, our loved ones, relationships, how this pandemic has brought death, suffering and hardship to many, and how at the moment its long-term consequences seem hard to predict.

As individuals, communities and as a human family we face a return to so-called 'normality' that will not be as easy or comfortable as some would have us believe. The road ahead can seem arduous and burdensome and brings with it fresh concerns which can, if we are not careful assail us, worries that seem all the more pressing when we seek, as is often our first response, to face them in our own strength and relying on our own resources.

In doing so we head down a path where the needs of others can be easily obscured, where we simply look inwardly to our own concerns, and where, if we are not careful, we generate attitudes

of self-sufficiency and self-reliance that can all too easily fail and falter. At such times and in these moments we need our gaze to be lifted and our spirits raised, to hear words of life that endure, graciously given so that we might flourish and so patiently and joyfully know that the Lord's faithfulness is neither limited and restricted. Trusting that to live we need to drink again from the truth of God's holy word.

Hence, what did the Israelites do in their time of trial and torment? They didn't seek solace in clever oratory or empty words or vain political pledges, but came together before the Lord - women and men, old and young - all the people united as one. As the priest Ezra read aloud, with insight and understanding, the timeless words of the law that had been preserved from the times of their ancestor Moses. Remembering even in the trials of the present, their story and experience could only be understood in the context of God's larger and greater story. Their experiences of sadness and unease re-framed through being reminded of sure and certain promises, which held their past and secured their future.

This is why the people are encouraged not to weep or lament, but to rejoice and be glad. Knowing that the words of God do indeed revive the soul, that they can be implicitly trusted, reminded that even in adversity, strength and peace can and will be known. As Ezra exclaims to those assembled, *'for this day is holy to our Lord; do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength'*. In short, the reading of God's word brings healing and offers renewal; refreshment for weary spirits and support for restless souls. Our future might not be easily predicted but, with the Lord, it is most definitely secure.

Here then is an invitation for us all to live in response to the utter reliability of the God who calls us into his fellowship and service. The God who in Christ, the Word made flesh, has entered into the reality of our world - its messiness and confusions, its sorrows and sadnesses - and, as we read in today's gospel, has promised that his words of love and life will forever remain.

Such words not only provide instruction but offer us direction when we find it difficult to see the way ahead. They extend the scope of our vision beyond the limits of what we can be seen, and even what we think we can know, to the God whose power exceeds all in heaven or on earth. The same God who is with us now, in whose word is our hope, in whose faithful keeping and lively oracles is found the fulness of life itself.

✠ In the name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Collect
for Bible Sunday

Blessed Lord,
who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning:
help us so to hear them,
to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them
that, through patience, and the comfort of your holy word,
we may embrace and for ever hold fast
the hope of everlasting life,
which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Old Testament Reading

All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose.

And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen', lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

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

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, 'This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.' For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, 'Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.' So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, 'Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be

grieved.' And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

Ezra 8.1-12

Gospel Reading

Jesus said to his disciples, 'Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see "the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven" with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.'

Matthew 24.30-35

Prayers of Intercession

- ▶ for the Church of God throughout the world - that we may seek inspiration together in the Scriptures we may preach and proclaim the gospel of love;
- ▶ for the Bible Society and all who work to translate, study and understanding the words of Scripture;
- ▶ for the world in all its suffering and need, for the promotion of peace and justice and righteousness in all places and amongst all people;
- ▶ for those who are isolated, alone or afraid, that they might know the strength of God's spirit and the encouragement of his word;
- ▶ for all whom we love and care for, our families, friends and all our neighbours, asking that Christ may be present in our lives and homes;
- ▶ for all who are sick or suffering, those known to us and those known to God alone, that they may know Christ's healing and wholeness in body, mind and spirit;
- ▶ for the departed and all who rest in the nearer presence of the Lord, remembering all who are grieve the loss of loved ones - may Christ, the living Word, dispel all darkness and give to us all the light of eternal life;
- ▶ for glimpses of God's grace in the week ahead, that we may seek from the Lord instruction, wisdom, insight and strength to walk in the way of his commandments.

THE SUNDAY SUPPLEMENT

KENT ESTUARY MISSION COMMUNITY PRAYER MEETINGS

<http://bit.ly/KEMCPrayer>

The next next prayer gathering for the church communities of the Kent Estuary Mission Community will be on **Tuesday 27 October at 10.30am** (led by the church community at St James, Arnside).

After that we will meet again on **Tuesday 10 November at 10.30am** (led by the church community at St Thomas' Milnthorpe).

It is hoped that these gatherings will serve to strengthen our common faith and shared fellowship across the Kent Estuary as we look ahead to working together as church communities into the future. Everyone is always welcome!

CHURCH OF ENGLAND RESOURCES

<https://www.churchofengland.org/>

<https://soundcloud.com/the-church-of-england>

<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/join-us-service-daily-prayer>

<https://www.youtube.com/thechurchofengland>



The Church of England Service comes from our own Diocese of Carlisle.

The service is led by The Right Reverend Dr Emma Ineson, Bishop of Penrith as we celebrate Bible Sunday, giving thanks to God for the wisdom and blessings of Scripture.

Some parts of the service were filmed in the Parr Chapel at Holy Trinity, Kendal and features contributions from across the Diocese and county reflecting on the power of God's written word on their lives of faith.

The service can be found online here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NIDgvdXAKKY>

DAILY HOPE PHONE LINE

The Church of England has developed a national **free** phone line to help support those who might feel particularly isolated at this time, especially if they have no access to the internet. The phone number is **0800 804 8044** and provides a collection of readings, prayers and hymns that can be listened to, all of which are updated regularly. If you know of anyone who might appreciate this service, please do let them know the phone number and pray that it will be a blessing to many.

