

**Sermon Epiphany 3 24<sup>th</sup> Jan 2010 Sung Eucharist**

**Neh 8:1-3,5-6,8-10/Cor 12:12-31a/Luke 4:14-21**

**How good are you at listening?** I said how good are you at listening?!

I'm not asking how deaf or otherwise you or I may be, but when listening to someone telling a story, making a speech, how much do we really take in? Of course it will depend on the context: if it is our spouse telling us in far too much detail about an incident at work whilst we're trying to finish three other jobs at the same time we may well be forgiven for only having half an ear on the job (by the way don't let Phil know I said that!). But if the story is given when we are still and ready to listen, given by someone we want to learn from, someone we respect and admire then we will undoubtedly listen with more attentiveness. Think back to your teachers at school, to the ones who could keep your attention. They not only talked with enthusiasm about their subject but also with authority. And their words made an impact. But with others their lack of inspiration or poor communication skills may have turned you right off and rather than learning and being changed you may have dreamt your way through those lessons.

It's not always easy to listen and to listen attentively, and yet St James wisely urges us to be quick to listen not only to our friends but to everyone and to God. But we need to put ourselves in the right context to hear!

In two of our readings today we hear of the scriptures being read aloud to a gathered assembly. These two occasions were over 500 years apart and in different contexts, but in both the reading provoked a response from the hearers, a response to God.

**The first** of these was given in the open air in Jerusalem probably in the latter half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. Nehemiah had returned from exile in Babylon, with the astonishing permission of the Babylonian King Artaxerxes, and had succeeded in rebuilding Jerusalem. Despite opposition, ridicule and constant danger, that in fact had been the easy bit. Far harder was the next task to rebuild a people fit to live in Jerusalem and to be God's covenant people.

The people in Jerusalem at this time were a very mixed bag. Some of them were the dregs of the population who were left behind in Jerusalem during the successive waves of invasion – not even thought worth the effort of taking captive! Some were Jews who had chosen to return, like Nehemiah, many of them were wealthy and independent, who had done well in exile. Some may have continued to be as faithful to God as was possible under the circumstances, but some had forgotten even the most basic things about their God. Some had married people of other nations and religions and their loyalties were severely divided.

So the people were gathered in the open air, in a square at the heart of the city, and Ezra the priest stood up and began to read from the book of the law of Moses – he read from the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures, the *Torah*. The people needed to learn again about their God and about their covenantal relationship with its expectations on them as the people of God. So great is their desire to relearn, to remember and to be themselves again that we are told they stand from early morning until midday listening as Ezra reads, and with trained people going through the crowds to make sure that people can really understand what is being said to them and what is being asked of them.

And **what was their response?** They wept. They wept and bowed down low. What were these tears? Were they tears of nostalgia - a longing for the past, the great days of Moses? Were they tears of shame and sorrow because they had forgotten so much of what they were now hearing? Or were they tears of joy that at last they could enter again into their proper heritage? Probably a mixture of all three.

But the important point is that **listening to the word of God had provoked a response.** Their tears of emotion testified to their having heard God and been moved and changed by him. The word of God had entered into their hearts. And their inward change was then directed by Ezra and others to be channelled towards two things – they were to remember to feed the poor and to worship their God.

**500 years later and to the second public reading of Scripture.** We are now inside a synagogue in the dusty town of Nazareth in Galilee. Luke tells us that Jesus filled with the Spirit, returns to his home town having been baptised by John and having survived a bewildering and harsh 40 days of temptation in the desert. Jesus enters the synagogue, and like Ezra unrolls the scroll - this time reading from the Prophets. He read from Isaiah and we get the sense that you could have heard a pin drop. Every eye was on him and every ear attuned. They heard this young man, Joseph the carpenter's son whom many of them knew, read these prophetic words of God about his purposes and mission: to bring good news, to release captives, give sight, offer freedom and announce God's blessing.

And **what was their response?** We hear less about this. But it was undoubtedly mixed. They heard and saw in Jesus an authority they had not seen before. They were impressed by the stories of him that were spreading over Galilee since the baptism; and yet when in the next few verses he began to challenge their exclusive and narrow interpretation of their faith they rapidly turned against him with anger and even hatred, casting him out into the streets. I wonder how we would have responded to **the Word of God reading the word of God?**

Because this is just what it was. Martin Warner, in the Church Times this week, wrote this:

“ Jesus, as the Word of God, is reading words that were already his before they were Isaiah's...It is the voice of the author who wrote and created what he is reading about”

So for me, as I was preparing this sermon, it was **Jesus' reaction and response to his own reading of scripture that intrigued me** more than how the other hearers reacted. I wonder whether this was one of those moments in Jesus own life when, as he was reading, perhaps for the first time, he fully realised what his mission and ministry was all about. Was it one of those rare but wonderful moments when the words of scripture cut us the core and challenge, provoke and change us forever; when the words we hear seem to be just for us. I wonder whether you have had experiences like that.

These words, that were Jesus's before they were Isaiah's (!), are often called **Jesus mission statement or his manifesto.** Jesus knew what he was being asked to do by his Father. **His purpose was and remains to do God's justice and to create God's community here on earth** – for the poor, the blind, the captive, and those who are oppressed.

And as we hear these words today **what is our reponse?** Do these words of God change and challenge us? Do they cut us to the heart as we realise that this same manifesto, this same mission statement is also **our call today?** We, the Church, are now Christ's body here on earth, entrusted with the same task of bringing good news to the poor, releasing captives, giving sight to the blind, freeing those who are oppressed and encouraging joy and life lived in and through God's grace.

This is the whole Church's joint task. As we come to the end of this **week of prayer for Christian unity** it is good to be reminded that we all share in the responsibility of continuing to work towards this manifesto of God's in Jesus. Our reading from Corinthians reminds us that whatever our role within the body we are equally vital for this mission and ministry to be effective. Don't let's get too bogged down in naval gazing, considering for too long whether individually we are a nose or a foot. Rather this passage is meant to stress the importance of our togetherness, of all of us **listening** to God's Spirit guiding and calling us, challenging and cajoling us towards these same goals.

So back to the opening question: **How good are we at listening?** Listening to the Word of God and letting the Word of God fill us.

“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,  
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.”