

Open the Book

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

27 January 2019

In 1999, a small group of church volunteers started going into a few schools in Bedford to read and act out stories using the Lion Storyteller Bible. After being inspired by this, the project spread into Gloucestershire. Later, in 2007, a national charity was formed under the name *Open the Book*. With increasing growth of volunteer numbers into the thousands, OtB joined the Bible Society in 2013. Now, in 2019, the organisation celebrates its 20th birthday. A great occasion for thanksgiving. And, of course, we know all about it, as some members of our own congregation are parts of this worthy venture here at Amersham, where they are now working in 6 different schools. From time to time we have reports of their progress here at church and we have even been treated to watching them in action.

The original idea came about because of the recognition that generations after generations of children are growing up in our society now without learning anything about the Bible, which is, after all, the foundational document of the Christian faith. There are many-many Bibles around, it is supposed to be the world's best-selling and most widely distributed book, but sadly the crucial action of actually opening it and learning about it does not always match those figures. This is not really surprising. Without some careful introduction and some real hunger for finding out its contents, the Bible is not an easy book to read.

In our Lectionary readings today we can trace back the tradition of opening Scriptures some two and a half thousand years, right to the time of the Hebrew people's return from their Babylonian exile. After one of the most traumatic events in their history, when they were torn from their homes and their nation's very existence became questionable, we find the people of God in the middle of trying to rebuild Jerusalem, the Temple, and some semblance of a coherent society. Under the leadership of Nehemiah the governor and Ezra the priest, the nation has to undergo painful changes to re-establish their national and religious identity. And it is at this point, that the people feel the need to open the book and together listen to the Word of God. In their case this meant going back to

the Law of Moses, which came to their ancestors all those centuries before. The priest Ezra obliges and standing on a wooden platform he unrolls the scrolls and reads to the people. Thus he becomes the originator, or institutor of public reading of Holy Scripture in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

When Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth and unrolls the scrolls handed to him, he steps into this, by then, well-established, unbroken custom of Sabbath activity, opening Scriptures in a communal setting with the purpose and expectation that in some way God's voice could be heard from the ancient writings. And that that word would contain a message relevant to their situation there and then. And 2000 years later this is still our purpose and expectation when we gather on a Sunday: to open the Book and hope to hear a word that would strengthen and deepen our relationship with God and with each other. So, every time someone goes up to our pulpit, like Dorothy did a few minutes ago, to open the Bible and read a passage to us we should remember that we are standing in the tradition not just of Jesus, but of countless generations of Hebrew worshippers before him and after him. This remembering gains a special significance on a day, which is designated to the memory of the dreadful events of the Holocaust in the WW2.

The way we read Scripture from the pulpit in this church, is unusual. The more common practice is to use the lectern, or reading desk for that purpose and keep the pulpit exclusively for preaching. That is the practice, which gave rise to the cynical remark, that the lectern is for the inspired word of God, while the pulpit is for the uninspired words of the preacher. It could be said that our practice makes sure that some inspired words may come from the pulpit as well! And, of course, in all seriousness, every preacher's prayer is that their words, by the miraculous intervention of the Holy Spirit, may be instruments of God's word.

But there is no doubting of Jesus' words being inspired in that small village synagogue in Nazareth. It comes after his baptism in the river Jordan and after his time away in the wilderness. There he had already decided on the roads NOT to be taken, if he were to be God's messenger. It is fascinating to watch him as he 'opens the Book' and now

finds the positive model to follow in the ancient traditions of his people's faith. Whether this was the actual moment when he realised which way his ministry should go, there is no mistaking Luke's purpose of using this incident (together with next Sunday's Lectionary passage) as a kind of prelude to introduce in a nutshell the life that would be spent for others and would end on a cross.

A couple of things struck me as I re-read this passage. One is more obvious than the other, at least more obvious for those who knew the original OT text quoted by Jesus, as some of his audience would have done. It comes from Isaiah 61, where the sentence '*to proclaim a year of the Lord's favour*' continues '*and a day of vengeance of our God*'. Jesus stops at the 'Lord's favour'. He is not a literalist. He does not read Scripture slavishly, he reads it with his own inner, Spirit-inspired understanding. He instinctively feels that however much this little crowd in front of him may be proud bearers of their tradition, in their current situation, the last thing they need to hear of, is a vengeful God. And dare we go further? Even though the Isaiah passage talks about a vengeful God in relation to Israel's enemies, perhaps Jesus's message of the all-encompassing love of God eclipses all thoughts and beliefs of any kind of vengeance. Jesus does not seem to believe in a God of vengeance.

The second thing I noticed this time round was that the way Luke presents the story, the rejection of Jesus is not caused by his application of the Scriptural text to his own time, or to himself. When he starts his sermon with '*Today, in your hearing, this text has come true*', there is general approval. '*They were astonished that words of such grace should fall from his lips*' we read. What throws them into a frenzy, will be the subject of next Sunday's theme, so I don't want to pre-empt the interpretation of that part. I just find it interesting that their general approval betrays the way in which they listen to Scripture and are ready to hear its application to their own situation. Or is it just, that like we, on hearing well-known and well-loved parts of the Bible, they are too contented that all is well with the world, God is in control and will act in due course. But that in the meantime, they can carry on with their lives as before. And, if this is the case, are they in fact, at least initially, missing the real significance of Jesus' interpretation? What Jesus is doing here is,

that on reading the passage, he applies its words to himself and accepts the full responsibility of the visionary life-programme of his prophetic predecessor. What's more, he wants his audience to do the same as well.

It is as if he said to them and saying it again to us: You do not have to wait for the golden age! You do not have to expect a kingly Saviour arriving on a white charger! Anyone, even the son of a simple carpenter, can be the bearer of the great news. Here, in your very own, treasured sacred text, there are the clear markers of the better world you are waiting for. Just hear them, they are the building blocks of a new kind of Kingdom! It is in your power to use them. God has given you the wherewithal of taking care of the poor, to spread the good news about God's favour to everyone, to guide the feet of those who may not see the way clearly, to live God's justice, which is always trumped by God's love and forgiveness and the granting of second and third chances. To see the hidden burdens people carry inside them and by going alongside them to use your friendship and love to ease their troubles and release them from whatever holds them back from an abundant life.

Although it didn't happen on this occasion in Nazareth, it is possible to hear the words of Scripture with open minds and open hearts. It did happen back in Jerusalem when Ezra, the priest opened the book and the people listened. Their pattern of worship gives an alternative reaction to the use of Scripture: they wanted to hear the word of God, they listened intently and tirelessly (from early morning till noon, actually), then they wept as they realised their shortcomings in the light of God's covenant faithfulness, then they dried their tears at the encouragement of the message and went home rejoicing, celebrating God's goodness. They ate and drank and feasted and they remembered those in need and shared their plenty with them. And they found their strength in the joy of the Lord. May God grant the same experience to us every time we open the Book.

Erna Stevenson
Amersham Free Church