

Epiphany 3 Sunday 24th January Luke 4 Nehemiah 8
Psalm 19 St Aldhelms

I've been asking people if they'd like to attend a **home group** and I've found some responses really insightful. 'I've nothing to offer,' said someone, 'I don't want to be put on the spot' said another. 'I'd find a daytime or lunchtime mid-week easier'. Can I re-assure you of two things – everyone has something to offer and no-one is going to be put on the spot.

All of us have life experiences and know a lot about something – as it says in Corinthians, we're all different parts of the same body. We consider one another better than ourselves and think carefully about how we speak to one another. No more so than when we are hoping to find out what God might be saying into our lives and to our church. No-one is going to be asked to come up with the **right answer** and none of us knows everything about the scriptures. As for when and where we might meet in the week I'd love to know when you

could join me. If you are already in a home group would anyone like to share why they go and what they keeps you going?

I'll confess I had to use the index to find Nehemiah myself and I can't tell you when I last looked at it. Today we're thinking about the value, power and timing of God speaking to us through the bible.

God chooses His **timing** to speak to us in different ways so we need to remain open to the bible as one of the primary ways. This is especially true since God withdraws from us at times and all we have is the written record.

The bible has become for me an endless source of **fascination inspiration** and **challenge**, once upon a time I was embarrassed that my friend the vicar's son would talk openly about his faith, and as for going into a Christian book shop – agh! My hope and prayer for this congregation, indeed this community is that more and more people discover or re-discover the value and power of God's word, as they did way back in the fifth century BC.

Back in 1992, as a recent convert, I was urged to attend a Christian **conference**. That was a step too far, but my bible study leader kept on at me to consider it. I think God respects those new to faith and responds to an immature but well-intentioned action. I adopted the pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey approach and said to God tell me whether or not to go to this conference and do it by my random selection of a page anywhere in the bible.

‘Deuteronomy 13:3’ says this,

*... the Lord your God is **testing** you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul*

‘Ok Lord I get the message’. If we don’t immerse ourselves in God’s word we cut off a vital source of communication.

I’d love to see more of you getting into God’s word and having a discussion regularly, not that it’s easy to commit week by week, I’m not expecting that. But if spiritual **growth** is to happen individually and corporately we can be sure of certain things God

calls the faithful to do, known as spiritual disciplines by some.

We don't often know God's plans or timing necessarily but there are certain foundational **building blocks** that will delight God and align us to His covenants: prayer, bible study and worship. It's tempting to press ahead with others programmes but the main thing needs to stay the main thing – we congregate for prayer worship and bible study and then we go out equipped into all the world. We are sent out to collaborate with God's mission to the world, speaking and acting in a way that points people to a kingdom coming. God's word is useful for teaching rebuking correcting and training in righteousness and was Jesus' first weapon in spiritual warfare.

This week's psalm, Psalm 19, compares God's word to gold and says that its more precious; it's compared to honey and described as sweeter. I'm proud of the fact that there are pew bibles here but I'm keen to know how often you are reading the

bible outside of church and especially in a group. **In a group** we have a dialogue and that is the most important aspect, discussing possible interpretations and what God might be saying to us at this moment, rather than getting to a single correct answer.

Jesus impressed people with the way he debated with them in the synagogue – preaching was more of a **debate** than a lecture. So, why not use Lent as a time when you commit to joining a bible study group and meet with others to find out why the psalmist thought the scriptures were sweeter than honey and more precious than gold. Why not **join me** at 8pm every Thursday in St Francis Church. It's an evening we all enjoy because, it's a chance to catch up as well as explore the bible and the God of surprises often steers the conversation to places we weren't expecting.

The book of Nehemiah points us to the tendency that communities and individuals at times have trusted God. At other times, God has not been

respected worshipped or obeyed. This trend has been described as cycles of **apostasy**.

The Judahites, or Jews as they became known, find themselves returned from a second period in exile, because God *had* been true to His word even though they have not. Doubting that God has our best interests at heart is one definition of sin I have found enlightening, because it resonates with the way children occasionally insist they know best, failing to recognize the wisdom experience and authority of parents or guardians entrusted with their welfare. God shows His **love by disciplining** as well as by comforting in the same way we know that sometimes a rebuke and a punishment is vital if a child is to understand boundaries and mature into a responsible member of society.

Bizarrely God keeps trusting people groups and individuals throughout history despite our willfulness and determination to spoil what He has ordained. Why make **covenants** with mankind knowing we are sinful? Perhaps God knows that by

insisting on believing in our potential to be trustworthy some will be transformed into the likeness of Christ, it is a costly enterprise that is worth the effort. God is always more willing to give us another chance and to **trust** us than we are to believe and trust in Him.

Twice, the Israelites are banished into **exile** because of their corruption, once into Egypt and once into Babylon, yet in the end God restores and heals his people. In the passage, chapter 8 of Nehemiah, the people rediscover the value of hearing and learning God's word. They feel **convicted** and challenged that they have forgotten about God's word and are not in the habit of applying it to their lives. How easy it is to fall into habits of neglecting to learn, study and apply God's word.

The Psalmist describes God's decrees as sweeter than honey and more precious than gold. That's not a typical description of rules and regulations, of laws to live by. More usually people have viewed discipline and regulation as spoiling our fun, that

God is some kind of **cosmic spoilsport**. We have learnt to our cost that deregulation can have undesirable consequences such as in the financial services sector. Throwing out the rule book did not facilitate prudent or sound financial management.

May we be forgiven where our actions or words give the impression that to be a member of the Christian community is to reduce life, to go without, to miss out on good times that others are having, that God spoils our sport. What advert for faith is it if our invitation is 'Come to church and be as unhappy as us?' Where our lives bear witness to the gifts of the Spirit we point people to God and His kingdom. Where we are **ungracious, negative, critical**, lacking joy peace patience gentleness and self-control we re-inforce other's reasons for having nothing to do with us. Gandhi said he could believe in a Redeemer if he ever met the redeemed.

St Paul describes the law in the book of Romans as something that trips us up, that sin is waiting to catch us out. 'Why do I do what I don't want to do'.

That's true if our confidence rests in our ability to keep God's standards, and we all fail often. Yet where the transforms us into the **likeness of Christ**, the more our desire will grow to live the way God intends; the scriptures will make more and more sense and we will see in them wisdom and freedom and protection for self and society. How will we know Christ unless we read about him in the bible as well as pray and share our experience of Him with others?

The Judahites in the sixth century in Nehemiah's account hear the reading of the law from dawn until noon and are moved to wail and cry. When we know we have been truly **convicted** of waywardness, true remorse can often manifest itself in an emotional outburst. But here the people are urged to acknowledge that it's a sacred day, they are invited to celebrate with 'a feast of rich foods and sweet drinks' and to share it with others who have nothing prepared.

The reason to be joyful is explained that **inner strength** comes from rejoicing in the Lord, giving thanks for all He represents, giving him glory and enjoying him forever. Inner strength was once again evident when I heard the eulogy of a dear lady recently departed and sometime member of this church. Her son described her hard life of long manual labour following the early death of her husband. Yet the resilience was always there to keep going and here was someone whose strength remained in the joy of the Lord.

The precious liberating nature of a good rule, a sensible way for us all to sign up, to protect us all from harm was evident in the Safeguarding training I attended on Thursday. Where we all realise the wisdom of signing up to a **code of conduct**, 'Allegations Management' as it's now known, it became apparent in the case study we considered that all parties benefitted from policy that stands above and beyond our individual circumstances or context. We are protected from undue harm when

we follow codes of conduct, adhere to best practice, follow the wisdom of scripture.

How about this for a biblical principle:

[Being One in Christ](#)

*...2make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. 3Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as **more important** than yourselves; 4do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.*

I am persuaded that we need to adopt a code of conduct for this church. For example use of social media and how we use it. If you're involved in a ministry including children or vulnerable adults whose consent should you seek before becoming their friend on **social media** if only to invite them to events?

Timing is often significant in God's plans for us and Isaiah prophesied that the people would not hear from God for four hundred years, from the fourth

century BC until the time of Christ. All they had, in the absence of God's direct appearances or theophanies, were the OT scriptures. I say, all they had but that is true also for us. There are barren periods in our spiritual life where all we have is our bibles to hear from God because He chooses to **remove Himself** from our presence, sometimes through our disobedience, sometimes to help us mature and walk by faith not sight.

Epiphanytide, is that church season of insight, the start of new beginnings, the awakening. Jesus' public ministry begins according to Luke by quoting scriptures to defeat the temptations of the devil. Then using the power of the spirit bestowed upon him at baptism and the richness and sweetness of the law of the Lord, Jesus declares **the time is now** that God is using his Son to reveal to the in-crowd that those outside their community will be welcomed into the kingdom of God with open arms.

Without the Spirit we dry up, without the word we blow up, but with the Word and the Spirit **we grow**

up. Why not join me and let's get into the Word of God together. Amen