

Sunday 29 October 2023, Bible Sunday Parish Eucharist
Nehemiah 8.1–6, 8–12
The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams

When I first saw that I was on the rota to preach Bible Sunday, I was really excited. Then I started asking myself a lot of questions: What do I think the Bible is? What do I think is supposed to happen when I read it? What do I think is happening when other people read it? Do other people even read it? What about when I don't enjoy reading it?

After a little while of thinking like this, I realised the questions I was asking were too big. Or rather, not too big, but too lacking in context. My questions felt overwhelming because they weren't anchored in the Bible itself. So, anchoring myself as preacher in the Bible- specifically in our first lesson, Nehemiah chapter eight- let me suggest four things from the text that might help us when we approach our own Bibles.

First, the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. Second, they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord. Third, they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. Finally, all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing.

So first, attentiveness. When we approach our Bibles, we should be attentive. Open its pages with the expectation that you will hear something. I know this might seem obvious, but it is just so easy to read words and to hear nothing but words. Attentiveness is about being open to the possibility that God might have something important to say to you specifically. It may be found in a narrative from the Old Testament, in the cry of a Psalm, or the explanation at the end of a parable. But it is intended not just for those who first heard the word, but for you now, today. Be attentive when you read or are read to. God is speaking to you through those words.

Second, worship. If you've ever received a love letter or a note from a small child you may understand what I'm about to say. Some texts are special, not because they're great works of literature, but because of who wrote them. The language may be plain, but because of their source we treasure and honour them. The Bible was written by people long dead, some of whose names we don't even know. But those people are members of our spiritual family. They wrote for their loved ones, for us, often at the explicit behest of the Holy Spirit. And this is true not just of prophetic books like Isaiah or Wisdom, but of much of our New Testament. St Paul writes in one place: *'For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you'*. What he has to say, he heard from the lips of Jesus himself and he hands it on to us as a precious treasure. Your Bible is a collection of cherished words from your family, and it speaks about the God who loves you. Come to it expecting to worship.

Third, reading with interpretation. Sometimes what God has to say can be challenging or even difficult to understand. So from the earliest days of the Church, the Bible has been read in conversation with itself and in conversation with others. For example, Matthew quotes Isaiah, Hosea, Malachi, and Zechariah. He interprets their prophecies for us and says, 'These are about

Jesus'. One part of the Bible helps make sense of another part. It's one reason that the library of books- ta biblia in Greek simply means '*the books*'- is bound together in one volume. Often, the help we need to understand is right there already. Reading with interpretation can also be about hearing the voices of others who have read the Bible with care in their day and passed their thoughts on to us. Like those who explained the Law to the people, many theologians have helped interpret the Bible for the Church. I often depend on them when I prepare a sermon, and what a help they can be!

Finally, they went their way to send and rejoice. When we hear words clearly addressed to us, it provokes a response. Our passage from Nehemiah suggests a two-part response and this feels right to me. Response to the Bible is a balance of action and praise. Both are important for our growth as holy people. When we hear the word of God, we are called to act on it. In the case of our Old Testament lesson, the action was to send portions to those who had nothing prepared; in other words, to share the feast. But the people were not just willing to share, to do something. They also celebrated that God had spoken to them. They rejoiced at hearing his voice. Do we rejoice when we hear good things from the lips of those we love? Your Bible contains God's voice and the voices of your spiritual family speaking to you in all openness and in all love. So be attentive. Bow your head and be worshipful. When you come across a difficult passage, read with interpretation. Finally, respond with good works and rejoice. The Bible is God's precious gift to you. It contains wisdom, instruction, and love. Hear him. Worship him. And go on your way to love and to serve him. Amen.