

Picture a large square just inside the gate of a walled city, with fifty thousand people gathered in it. It is six o'clock in the morning. There is a wooden platform at one side, and a small group of men climb up onto it. One of them begins to read. He carries on for six hours, with occasional breaks so that his companions can explain to the crowd the meaning of what they are hearing. Then the city mayor declares a great celebration, and every morning for the next week the man continues his reading. Everyone rejoices and feasts in a way they haven't done for generations, and there is an infectious spirit of revival, renewal and recommitment.

So who were the people and where were they? And why am I telling you this story today?

The people were the Israelites, and the man doing all the reading was a scribe and priest called Ezra. The mayor was Nehemiah, and the celebration was because Cyrus, king of Persia, had allowed the Israelites to come back to Jerusalem from exile. He had even given back all the temple treasures that Nebuchadnezzar had seized fifty years previously. Led by Zerubbabel, the people had rebuilt the temple, and led by Nehemiah they had rebuilt the city walls. Having reconstructed their material lives, they had now come together to reconstruct their culture and traditions, and their spiritual lives. For hundreds of years they had gradually allowed things to slide; now, following the desolation of exile, they could finally see just how far they had strayed from the rules God had given them. They were ashamed, chastened, penitent and prepared to make a fresh start. So Ezra read them the Law of Moses.

Judging by the people's reaction, a lot of what he read was unfamiliar to them, and had to be explained. They rediscovered their roots — the story of God's relationship with his people, the promises made to Abraham, the years in the wilderness with Moses, their arrival in the Promised Land, and the commandments that had been set down for them. They heard again about the religious practices they should follow and the conduct expected of them. And hearing it all, they rejoiced, made solemn repentance and started on their new life as the chosen people of God.

This is a story of tremendous spiritual renewal, and I'm telling it today because, as well as being the last Sunday after Trinity, today is Bible Sunday. That great rebirth of the Israelites was brought about by a ceremonial reading of part of the Bible — the first five books of the scriptures; the Law of Moses. Ezra was a scribe (literally) and a scholar; he interpreted the Law and may have rewritten and reorganised some of it while in exile. But he wasn't reading something completely new. His reading was powerful and effective because the material was old and being rediscovered; because it was being brought into the open and proclaimed in public; because it had an intrinsic authority which challenged everyone — kings, priests, officials and ordinary people alike. Ezra described the Law as 'the wisdom of your God which is in your hand'.

Two thousand years later, something rather similar happened. The great Protestant reformers dragged the Latin Bible out of the hands of the Catholic church, made new translations from the original Greek and Hebrew into local languages, and — with the help of the newly-invented printing press - made it available to ordinary people to read. The idea that everyone should and must read and interpret the Bible for themselves was revolutionary, and in England it was also heretical. First Wycliffe and then Tyndale translated the Bible into English. Wycliffe Bibles were outlawed in 1408; if you had a copy you could be burned at the stake. Many people were. Even 125 years later, Tyndale had to work in Germany because of this prohibition. His Bibles were smuggled into England. He was eventually arrested and executed, but shortly afterwards one of his assistants, Miles Coverdale, produced another

translation which was given an extravagant dedication to Henry VIII. Henry could see that an English Bible would be an asset to the English reformation (which was also helping with his wife-problem). But the real spiritual renewal came with the open discussion and questioning up and down the land, and with a new wave of writings and commentaries by a succession of English theologians and preachers.

Five hundred years further on, where are we? All sorts of Bibles are accessible to us, from the King James Version to the Street Bible, as well as text and Twitter renditions. Sometimes I think we know it too well. The words are comfortably familiar. The stories come round regularly in our cycle of readings. We read it respectfully and religiously (I use the word deliberately). But does it have the impact it did when Ezra read it to the Israelites, or when the sixteenth-century English cobbler could read it himself for the first time? Would we save up for six years and then walk twenty-five miles barefoot over the Welsh mountains to get hold of a copy, as Mary Jones did in 1789?

Perhaps it's time to refresh your relationship with the Bible. Maybe it would be a good project for Advent. How you do this depends entirely on you! Read a completely different version. Read it as a continuous text (there are versions set out like an ordinary book — not in verses). Read it out loud. Read it with a friend and discuss it as you go. Read some of the parts we rarely get to in church. Read the Apocrypha. Take one short section and read it every day for a week, or a month, and wait for it to speak to you. Read it with a commentary to explain more about it. It has inspired great deeds, great sacrifice and great saintliness. People have been imprisoned, tortured and died for it. Remember Ezra's words: it is 'the wisdom of your God, in your hands'. Whatever you do, don't let go of it. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.