

Sermon for Bible Sunday 29th October 2017
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Today is Bible Sunday – the day which for the past century the Church has chosen to make a special celebration and consideration of the book in my hand and on that lectern and on countless book shelves and bedside tables. The book or rather 66 books of God's holy word whose titles as a small child I learned by heart. If I weren't in the presence of people who can sing I would delight you all now with a recitation. Anyone who was with me in Junior Church will be able to confirm that this was inflicted on them.

The key text set for today is the one in Nehemiah – Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job etc.... Nehemiah is writing about events that took place in Jerusalem c 400 BC. Although Jewish, Nehemiah is the Persian King Atraxerxes cup-bearer – a high official and he has been instrumental in completing the rebuilding of Jerusalem after the Children of Israel return their following their exile in Babylon. The passage we heard describes Ezra, the highest religious leader, celebrating the completion of the rebuilding of the Temple and Jerusalem itself by reading from the Book of the Law. This is the edition of the five books of the law Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy... that has been written down in Babylon during the exile. He speaks to everyone who can understand – men, women and children, and on hand are that list of Levites – priests – who interpret his words. He speaks for about 4 hours and every word is hung upon. Hard to imagine that now. Not just because we are no longer have an oral tradition of listening, but more because the value of the text read is more questioned.

The Bible is not the only thing that is questioned – or worse, ignored - today. A survey this summer of British Social attitudes found that of all 18-25 year olds surveyed 3% identified themselves as Anglicans, 5% as Catholics – a smaller percentage identified as other Christian denominations. (Overall 74% of young adults surveyed claimed no religion of any kind.) Of the percentage who do identify as Christians one can imagine a smaller percentage who would say that the Bible plays a key part in their daily lives.

The real question I think that we have heard today is not in Nehemiah but in our Psalm. The question in the first verse of our reading from Psalm 119 today. It is on your notice sheet. "How can young people keep their way pure?" What do you make of that – sounds a bit old-fashioned and prescriptive? We have made great strides – though not enough – to keep young people safe and to give them a voice and empowerment – but to keep their way pure? Not so much, as the modern saying irritatingly goes.

What if instead of "How can young people keep their way pure?" we were to change the word "pure" that to some of its wider and deeper meanings? Pure as in simple, clear, real, authentic and true.

How can young people keep their way through life simple, clear real, authentic, true? Where might they look for help? Who can guide them? For help and guidance they do surely need and are hungry for.

Parental and other older adult role-models of course – to which I shall return – but these voices are often drowned in the tide of unregulated social media, celebrity culture, self-absorption, individualism? Without sounding like a prophet of doom, other recent surveys and news reports have proved that these when weighed in the balance for many young people these have been found wanting. (Daniel 5: 25 -28)

The truth is that it is hard to keep your life simple, real, authentic and true trusting in your own strength. Hard for us all let alone young people. When Ezra read the stories of God's hand on their lives at the Water Gate the people cried. They cried because they felt sad at all they had lost, they cried because they felt guilty at what they had done and they cried in gratitude for what God had promised to do. Ezra tells them to dry their tears and live joyful, thankful, God-guided lives. The word of God is not set in stone or parchment, but lives in men's, women's and children's hearts.

Paul too has an answer to the Psalmist's question though he expands it. Not just how can young people live true lives but how can any of us? He writes to the young Christians of Colossae, in what is now in Western Turkey, to guide them and encourage them. The passage we heard today from Paul's letter to the Colossians is the second half of his instructions. The bit before what we heard today is about what NOT to do. The things not to do are the self-destructive choices and habits that have damaged us through all human history. Damaged us, our relationships, and our societies. Paul warns against violence, dishonesty, promiscuity, greed and hatred. These things have always got in our way, tripped us up, kept us down, young or old. There is nothing new under the sun in what stops our lives being pure, simple, real and true. (Ecclesiastes 1 : 9) The new stumbling blocks are the same as the old stumbling blocks, just in new disguises.

How do we do live lives free from these harms? That is what we heard in the passage from Colossians today. To refresh your memory Paul writes: Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ^(s) dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. (Colossians 3: 14-16)

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly”. How lovely are the words dwell and richly. They speak of something that feeds our deepest needs and overflows into a life that shares this treasure with others.

The book in my hand contains the guidance for living lives that bring joy to us, hope for our world and glory to God. But it only does that by being first read and then lived – confidently. And that I think is where we all come in this Bible Sunday. To be confident in what God has done in our lives – letting Christ richly dwell in us and overflow into all our dealings with others. To be the role-models to our own children, to all God's children, of how our paths can be made straight (Proverbs 3: 6) and our lives sing with riches of his grace (Ephesians 1: 7). If we want to draw closer to God and by so doing encourage others then our answer is at hand. In this hand. May our Bibles come off our book shelves and into our hands, our hearts our lives our world. For to end with the ringing words of our Gospel today: Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. (Matthew 24: 35). Amen!