

LOCKDOWN WORSHIP Sunday 29 August 2021



St Heliers Presbyterian Worship Service prepared by Ian Kilgour

Call to Worship

(In days of stress we need to hear with reassurance the words of Jesus and our faith)

*"In this world you will have tribulation but be of good cheer,
I have overcome the world."*

"Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

*"Peace is what I leave you, it is my own peace I give you ...do not be
worried and upset; do not be afraid."*

*"Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor;
the kingdom of heaven belongs to them."*

*"Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires;
God will satisfy them fully."*

*"Happy are those who work for peace; God will
call them his children."*

"Come unto Me all that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest"

Hymn

O what amazing words of grace
Are in the gospel found,
Suited to every sinner's case
Who hears the joyful sound!

Poor, sinful, thirsting, fainting souls
Are freely welcome here;
Salvation like a river rolls
Abundant, free and clear.

This spring with living water flows
And heavenly joy imparts;
Come, thirsty souls, your wants disclose
And drink with thankful hearts

Come then, with all your wants and wounds,
Your every burden bring;
Here love, unchanging love, abounds,
A deep celestial spring.

Samuel Medley (1738-99)

Psalm 119:97-105 (NRSV)

Oh, how I love your law!
It is my meditation all day long.
Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies,
for it is always with me.
I have more understanding than all my teachers,
for your decrees are my meditation.
I understand more than the aged,
for I keep your precepts.
I hold back my feet from every evil way,
in order to keep your word.
I do not turn away from your ordinances,
for you have taught me.
How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!
Through your precepts I get understanding;
therefore I hate every false way.
Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.

James 1:17-27 – (NRSV)

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfilment of his own purpose, he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

Hearing and doing the Word

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore, rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if

any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

Reflection: A Gospel smorgasbord!

Lockdown provides us with time to consider more deeply matters of our faith and to sit quietly with the words of our faith and other helpful and inspirational readings.

On Saturday, but for the Covid lock down, a number of us were to attend the 'Preaching the Parables' seminar at Northern Presbytery. So in lieu of the seminar I want us to reflect on some aspects and methods of how Jesus taught.

Remember, a parable is not necessarily a true story but illustrates a deep and important truth. The truths of such stories and parables don't get handed to us on a plate – they act like brain teasers - we must study and think and puzzle about what it means, if we are to find the truth for ourselves.

And remember, the truth you find may well be different to the truth I find! No other sort of truth really changes us. Only truth that is personally understood in our own lived experience is going to be life changing and real to us. By his use of aphorisms and parables Jesus was in effect challenging us. "Judge for yourself what is right". "What do you think?"

The prophets said, "Thus saith the Lord", but Jesus rather says, "consider seeing it this way". 'The law of Moses says' or 'There is a saying....but I say to you....'.

Jesus taught with authority. He often said, ***"Have you not read, have you not studied and reflected on what's written?"*** Rabbis often started their teaching with, "There is a saying that Rabbi so and so said....". We all like to quote authorities to buttress our arguments by appealing to great scholars and authorities.

As said above the Prophets often started their pronouncements with, ***"Thus saith the Lord"***. Shirley sometimes adopts a similar approach! The old-time evangelists and preachers were known to bang the pulpit and raise their voice. And if we are honest, we tend to shout when our argument is weak!

'Have you not read' said Jesus, or he may well have said, 'if all else fails read the instructions' or 'For, God's sake read the instructions!' I remember well Shirley's comments when I installed a smoke alarm over the stove. If only I had read the instructions!

If you are like me, we often just skim read and can miss important points and the opportunity to discover the hidden pearls. Often, we treat our spiritual life like we do fast food. We snack on the run, instead of reflecting more deeply on the substantial wholemeal food to be found in the scriptures.

Jesus issues a caution here. There is a big difference between hearing and seeing. Jesus said many times **"You have heard that it has been said"**, and in each case because they had only heard, they got it wrong. He went on to remind his hearers what had actually been written.

An example, **"Jesus said, you have heard that it has been said, thou shalt love thy neighbour and hate thine enemy"** – well there is no such commandment written in scripture. That's the danger of relying on hearsay or on oral tradition. It becomes filtered through our defective memories or prejudices.

There is another danger. Jesus also deplored a trend for people to use the ear rather than the eye. **Says Jesus, have you not read?** How often do our partners find it necessary to say, "use your eyes!" We have to search out the truth for ourselves.

There is a tendency in all of us to give an ear rather than an eye. Hearing is easier than reading. Hearsay is more exciting than cold print. But as soon as we work our ears at the expense of our eyes, we start to get things wrong. Things become vague and inaccurate. This is an educational principle. It's too easy to rely on other people's experience. We need to move from second-hand experience to first-hand relationship and that's why scripture is so sacred, because it connects us to God's Spirit, and we then enter into 'first-hand' experience. **'Beyond the sacred page I see thee Lord'**, as the hymn expresses.

In Ezekiel Chapter 3: 1-2 there is a good example of how we should read the Bible. If you read the Bible only in a literal/factual sense you will be doing what the modern scientific mind does - it sees life only in terms of provable facts and nothing more. Something is true or false – an example of either/or thinking. But the Bible speaks to all times and places precisely because it has a meaning well beyond just time and place and the factual and literal.

Ezekiel hears the voice of God, then he sees the hand of God holding the scroll and he responds by receiving it. He then tastes and consumes the scroll, delighting in its sweetness. Then, Ezekiel responds and takes action to share. Note the sequence!

Ezekiel had a vision, and a vision by its very nature is not in the realm of provable factuality. His vision comprised of *hearing & listeningseeing & receivingtasting & consuming..... responding & acting* **"O taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps.34.) "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth", said the Psalmist. (Ps.119.v 103).**

In Rev. 10.8-11 there is another event of eating the scroll. John is told twice to take the scroll and eat it! Even when he asks the angel to give it to him, the answer is that he must take it. There is significance here. God's revelation is never forced on anyone. A person must take it for themselves. If we are going to be fed with the word of God, we must take personal responsibility and make the personal effort. Like in Ezekiel, it is to be eaten - taken into our inmost being. The angel says, **"Take it and eat it"**. Many get indigestion because they skim read and don't give the time for deeper reflection.

If we are to be people of God we need to reflect and meditate on God's word, we must digest it, so it is taken into our inner life, to become part and parcel of our very life and so it can say something to our current need and situation.

The angel then says a very interesting and somewhat contradictory thing - "***it will be bitter to your stomach, but it will be as sweet as honey to your mouth***".

Who remembers the old slate boards at school? When Jewish children were learning the alphabet, it was written on a slate in a mixture of flour and honey. They were taught what the letters were and how they sounded. If the teacher pointed to a letter and the child said it correctly then they could lick the letter off the slate as a reward. The alphabet was therefore like honey to their mouths. If only my education had had such incentives!

But curiously the angel adds another less palatable idea. It will be bitter to your stomach, and John having eaten it, confirms its bitterness! So, while the word we take in and digest can address our every need it also has a purpose to come with challenge, conviction and discomfort.

God's provision is sufficient whatever the need or circumstance but there is a cost – the cost of discipleship and owning the ways and values of Christ. In summary we could say that the word of God is for our comfort in hardship and trial, and for our challenge and discomfort when we are too comfortable and self-sufficient. The whole purpose of eating and digesting the scroll is as James argues in our lectionary reading - **we must be doers of the Word**, living in love and with practical expressions in response to the needs of our neighbours, communities, and our world.

Prayers & Celebrations

(in the face of Covid, distressing global tragedies and yet causes for celebration, I invite you to use the following affirmations to bring to mind and prayer, those situations and people appropriate to the particular affirmation)

- **Loving kindness** - Longing for the good & welfare of all and praying for and naming
- **Compassion** - Reflecting on the sorrows & sufferings of others and praying for and naming
- **Joyful Affirming** - Rejoicing in the success and prosperity of others and naming
- **Serenity** - Surrounding everyone with the peace of God, and naming

Benediction

Expressive God, we have heard your word,

May we learn to speak its truth.

We have been challenged by your call to action,

May we go forth to do your will

We have been inspired by your presence with us

May we share your love with others.

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ

The love of God

And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us. Amen