

Hope & Meaning in God's Word

NEHEMIAH 8:1-12 — Revd Guy



8 And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodia, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the meaning, so that the people understood the reading.

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, "Go on your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved." And all the people went on their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

Nehemiah 8:1-12 (ESVUK)

This nation, this world in fact, has, and still is, being shaken by the terrible impact of the Coronavirus. In many countries the initial shock and impact of the virus has been dealt with, at least to some degree, and the focus is now on rebuilding, working out how best to move forward whilst still facing the uncertainties of the future.

The Church has not escaped feeling the consequences of the Coronavirus either. Church buildings were shut for the best part of four months and public worship, although now allowed, has changed so that it hardly resembles what it did pre-COVID with no congregational singing permitted, Holy Communion in only one kind, and face masks on every person. So as the rest of the world is asking "What do we do now, how do we rebuild?" the Church needs to be asking a similar question: "How can we experience spiritual renewal in the face of coronavirus?"

That is what we are going to be exploring today on Bible Sunday because as God's authoritative word it is one of the primary ways that God speaks to his people today and so it is one of the primary ways for us to discover what God is calling us to now.

Inspiration needed

You may be surprised to hear that the situation that we face today is not so different to that of the Jews of the Old Testament. Our reading this morning comes from the Book of Nehemiah. He was a contemporary of Ezra who I spoke about a lot during lockdown and he lived at a time where the Jews had just returned from exile in Babylon. And just like we are looking to rebuild our lives after COVID-19, the Jews were looking to rebuild their old lives too. Although they had rebuilt the temple and the walls of the city of Jerusalem they were in need of some inspiration, something that would draw them together and bring them hope.

Similarly during lockdown, although we had things in place to deal with the virus we needed something to bring the people of this country together, to inspire us, to give us hope amidst the fear and despair. Then one man did something truly remarkable that brought the country together. Captain Tom Moore, a war veteran who had recently for a broken hip and skin cancer walked around his garden 100 times before his 100th birthday to raise funds in aid of NHS Charities Together. After setting an optimistic target of £1,000 Captain Tom's efforts inspired the nation and he raised over £30m! His efforts managed to bring this country together in a way that was much needed during lockdown and he was rewarded with a knighthood from the Queen.

Captain Sir Tom Moore inspired our nation but the Jews did not look for a war veteran for inspiration, rather they looked to Ezra the priest and to God's word.

The Bible brings people together

We read in Nehemiah 8:1 that 'all the people came together as one.' This was not just the people of Jerusalem, but all the Jews that were in the land - it was a large gathering. These people 'told Ezra...to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses.' This would have been the first five books of the Bible, or the Pentateuch, which recounts the origins and history of God's dealings with his people. Now it is unlikely that Ezra would have read this all by himself, (we read in Ne. 8:4 that there were 13 other people at Ezra's side) but God's word was read aloud to the Jews. It is quite remarkable how for the Jews there was nothing more important at that moment than to hear God's word and hear the history of their people. They did

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not require any coaxing to be there, no one orders them to gather; and they were united in their desire to hear the Book of the Law of Moses (Ne. 8:1). It is the same for us, the Bible details the path to our salvation and guides us to live the life we were originally created for - the Bible is a book we should all be clamouring to hear and read!

Did you notice where Ezra proclaimed God's word? He proclaimed it at 'the square before the Water Gate' (Ne. 8:3). It wasn't read in the newly rebuilt temple where only the men would have been able to hear it, rather it was read in a public place where everyone would have been able to gather as we read in verse 2, the crowd was made up of 'men and women and all who were able to understand' (Ne. 8:2). That means there would have even been some children in attendance for the reading. They all came to Jerusalem to listen to God's word be read - the Bible brought them together just as Captain Sir Tom Moore brought this country together.

But the Bible is not just for the Jews or just for Christians, rather it is for all people. The Apostle Paul writes that God ‘desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth’ (1 Timothy 2:4). Where can all people find such knowledge that leads to salvation? Only within the Bible.

It is no surprise to hear that there has been a resurgence of religious interest during this pandemic, particularly in Christianity. The reason I think this is is because the Bible offers us a

source of strength that gives us confidence in the face of a crisis. The hope of salvation, the promise of purpose, and a message of sacrificial love somehow resounds

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more truly and meaningfully at this moment as the world searches for a way through coronavirus. The Bible is for everyone and contains a message everyone needs to hear, we cannot leave it locked up in church buildings, but instead must bring its content out into the public sphere just as Ezra did, even if that is as limited as quoting a Bible verse as a way of offering hope and support to someone during this difficult time. Just as we each did our bit during the pandemic to keep people safe or to help them in their need we each need to do our bit in getting the message of God’s love out to the people of this world.

The Bible provides meaning and hope

For those of you who have been attending our Small Groups this term and partaking in ‘The Bible Course’ you will know that the Bible does not always provide answers to the “How” questions of life like “How was the world made” but provides answers to the “Why” questions like “why were we created?” We live in a time where people are more responsive than ever to things of a spiritual nature and people are asking more “why” questions. The coronavirus has reminded us of our mortality, reminded us that we are not masters of the universe, and made us ask questions of our life and existence - why are we here? why is there suffering? why do material things not satisfy me? why do i need interactions with other humans? The scientific method has not been able to provide satisfactory answers to these questions but the Bible provides answers to these in abundance.

The Bible helps people to find their place in life. For the Jews, they were moved as they heard the history of their people. We read in verse 9 that ‘all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the law.’ To hear the story of their people, to realise how far they had fallen as God’s people brought the Jews to tears. But Nehemiah tells them not to mourn or weep because it was a holy day. Holy days were opportunities for the Jews to remember the faithfulness of God and so with that in mind they would have been able to reflect back on the

words they had just heard and instead of just seeing how far they had fallen, how sinful they were, they would be able to see God's love and grace leading them to where they are now. Later in chapter 9 of Nehemiah we read that the Jews pray to God. In this prayer they recount the history of their people from Abraham up to that day and in this prayer they recall not only their repeated sinfulness but also God's repeated love and grace describing him as 'a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love' (Ne. 9:17).

Within the word of God, the Jews not only found the answers to why they were in the situation they were in but also hope for the future. The same is true for everyone today. The Bible reveals to us why the world is as it, why there is pain and suffering, why the world is broken. It is because of our sin, of our desire to be like God and make our own

rules to follow rather than following God's. But the Bible provides us with that hope as well. Hope found in the good news of Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection seeing that God in his love and grace has not abandoned

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us but promises a better future for us all - a future with him. It is hope found alongside the answers to our deepest questions that makes the Bible the most significant and relevant books for this time because the Bible helps us to navigate through life and provides hope for the future when the world says there is none.

We need help to understand the Bible

The Bible helps us to navigate through life answering the big questions we face on the way and it provides hope for the future, but this isn't always clear to see, we often need help to understand what God's word is saying. The Bible can often be confusing and sometimes makes us question what we previously thought to be true. As the crowds listened attentively to Ezra they obviously found some parts confusing as we read of the Levites going around the people as God's word was read 'and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read' (Ne. 8:8). Imagine that - Bible teachers moving from group to group, family to family and asking, 'How are you finding it? Do you need any assistance?' It reminds us that it's OK to struggle with the Bible and to ask for some help.

There are plenty of resources out there now to help us to understand scripture better. Each week on Wednesday, I post a video on Facebook from 'The Bible Project' that gives an accessible overview of a book of the Bible, helping us to understand what it is saying and giving us some context so that when we come to read the text for ourselves we are better equipped to understand what it might be saying to us today. Alongside that we have our small groups which help

us to dig into the Bible a bit deeper and provides an opportunity to discuss things that we aren't quite clear about. So my question to you is what is it that you could be doing to help you understand the Bible better and more importantly, how could you help others to understand the Bible?

The Bible brings joy that opens us up to community

The end of our passage today focuses on the response of the Jews to the hope they have discovered in God's word. They move from weeping to feasting and we hear the words of Nehemiah that have inspired so many hymns over the years 'the joy of the Lord is your strength' (Ne. 8:10). The Israelites respond to the conviction of their sin and the joy of their forgiveness by sharing what they have with others. They realise that what they have is a blessing that should be shared with others so those who don't

know that grace of God, those who do not have food to celebrate with can experience the same joy that they have. They shared what they had with those who had nothing and needed what they had.

“God's people experienced a new depth of community as they gathered around God's word”

One thing the pandemic has taught us is to be aware of those in our community who are struggling and to show kindness, support and to care for one other. After a difficult time which included returning from exile and struggling to rebuild Jerusalem, God's people experienced a new depth of community as they gathered around God's word 'because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.' When we read God's word, understand it, and then act on what we read, we find ourselves at the heart of our communities with answers for those struggling to find meaning in their lives, hope for the disillusioned and help for those in need.

So let us gather around God's word and seek his kingdom, let us seek to bring spiritual renewal to this place.

Amen.