

Service Transcript

Bible Sunday, October 25th 2020.

Leader: Delyth Mayhew

General Intercessions: Mark Reid

Talk: Andrew Ollerton (Bible Society)

Good morning, and welcome to you all, whether you are in church or watching from home, a member of the fellowship or a visitor. I hope that you will all be blessed as we worship together this morning.

- This is the Sunday designated as Bible Sunday –we are using resources from the Bible Society.

Prayer

Father God, it is so good to be able to meet together again this morning, to learn more of You and to give thanks for your gift to us of Your Son.

Lord, You spoke your word to make the world,
you spoke your word to your prophets to guide us,
you spoke your word in scripture, to tell the story of your love,
and you gave us your living word, Jesus Christ.

Bless us in our hearing and reading,
bless us in our telling and sharing,
and may our time together today be a blessing to ourselves,
to one another, and to all we meet in the days to come.

Amen.

Call to worship

Psalm 95 calls us to worship God with these words:

*Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord;
Let us shout aloud to the rock of our salvation.
Let us come before Him with thanksgiving,
And extol Him with music and song.
For the Lord is a great God,
The great King above all gods.
Come, let us bow down in worship,
Let us kneel before the Lord our Maker;
For He is our God.*

Intercessory Prayers for World and Church

Before we continue with our Bible Sunday theme, let's bring before the Lord some of the issues in the world and in our community and church family.

Father, we lift our world before You this morning as the death toll from the Coronavirus continues to rise. We pray for wisdom for those in our own land who have the responsibility in tackling the disease. Give them wisdom father, as they attempt to try to both reduce the spread of the virus without taking the populations through other forms of hardship. At this time when people find it difficult to see an end to the crisis, please open the eyes of men and women up to the need to turn to You afresh and recognise our shortcomings before You. We pray that treatments and vaccines will be developed soon.

We pray for your wider church here in our community of Felixstowe. We pray that the church will be a positive witness in our town as we tackle the issues that the present situation bring us.

We think particularly of our own locality of Walton, as we celebrate another year's ministry through the work of Walton Parish Nursing today. As people watch the video today, may they be encouraged by what we've been able

to do this year despite all the problems with the pandemic. We pray for Lorna, John and their team of volunteers, that you will continue to bless them that they may be a blessing to clients and that you will provide the necessary resources for this ministry to continue moving forward. We ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen

We are now going to have a short time of quiet personal prayer as we bring people and situations we know of personally before the Lord, whether they are in this fellowship or elsewhere.

Gap for personal prayers

Father, we lift all these people and situations before you. Touch their lives in a positive way this morning. Bring Your presence into their lives by Your Spirit, we pray, and may they come to you in their need be that for salvation, healing, peace, provision of need or help in distress. We ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen

With all that is going on in the world these days, there is one thing of which we can be certain – God is here, He is with us, He is in His world and He is good, all the time.

I am sure we all have one bible at home. Some may have more. I have ..25... - some of them my own but most inherited from my family, in both English and Welsh.

It can be easy for us to take the Bible and what it contains for granted.

Here are 4 stories from around the world which remind us what a wonderful gift the scriptures are.

Story from China

CHINA

'Yes, Lord Jesus, I am willing to serve you!'

Mu Weixu is a 33-year-old preacher who lives in a mountainous area of Yunnan province in China. He was facing many challenges even before the coronavirus outbreak.

How easy do you think it would be to say, 'Yes, Lord Jesus, I am willing to serve you!' if you are a poor preacher living in a rural area? You'd have to give up all your farming income to go out and preach the gospel.

Mu also has a wife and newborn baby son to support too.

When Covid-19 started spreading, the mountain preachers like Mu had to climb to continue their God-given mission suddenly got much bigger.

The suspension of all church meetings during the lockdown meant the income of preachers like Mu evaporated.

These situations can lead to rural preachers abandoning much-needed ministries in order to survive. And in China there is already a huge shortage of trained pastors, with just one trained leader for every 6,700 Christians.

Mu admits he was tempted to quit to seek a better paid job in the city, especially after the birth of his baby.

But he kept going, lifted up by the generosity, both in donations and in prayer, of Christians thousands of miles away in England and Wales.

Wu wanted to share his gratitude.

He said, 'I am thankful for your support, for now I can visit more brothers and sisters, and travel far to preach God's word. What's more, the needs of our baby can be taken care of now. This has strengthened my faith to know that God will always provide for me as I serve him faithfully!'

Let's pray:

We thank You, Lord, that the needs of pastors like Wu and their families were met during this last year. We pray that more and more pastors in China will be able to receive quality Bible training.

AMEN

Story from Middle East

MIDDLE-EAST

'Mummy, will you read me a story about Jesus?'

It was Easter, in the city of Aleppo in war-torn Syria.

Bible Society staff member Miss Nour gave pre-schooler Bechara a Bible storybook and said to him,

'This is a story from the Bible about Jesus Christ who loves you. See how Jesus is sitting among the children loving them with all his heart?'

Bechara took the book and ran to his mum. 'Look what a beautiful book they gave me! Will you read me a story about Jesus?'

Bechara's mother asked him if he had thanked Miss Nour for the book. He turned and shouted at the top of his voice, 'Thank you, Bible Society!'

Also at the same event in Aleppo, a very excited Nadim demonstrated his own kindness. He said, 'I've already got a Bible. Now I can give this one to my friend who hasn't got one!'

In Syria, Bible mission focuses on the younger generations.

Many of these children and young people have been exposed to the horrors of war.

Many more have been displaced.

More and more of them are finding hope in the Scriptures, hope to mend their broken lives.

In 2020, at Easter, 28,000 Bibles and Scripture storybooks were distributed to children at Big Bible Distribution Easter events in many towns and cities in Syria where it is safe to do so. Even more will be distributed at Christmas.

It's estimated that Scriptures handed out in 2020 will be seen by at least 100,000 children by the end of the year.

These gifts uplifted the youngsters who have suffered years of war and were also facing the added threat of coronavirus.

Let's pray:

Thank you Lord that children in the Middle-East are finding hope in your word.

We pray that tears of joy will replace those of despair as many more people discover hope promised in the Scriptures.

AMEN

Story from Africa

One child loved the Bible so much he read 10 stories a night!

There are about one thousand children at Nsungwi Church in rural Malawi.

For Sunday school they split into classes with about 100 kids in each class.

This is church on a big scale ... until it comes to their resources.

*There may be a thousand children in the church, but there are just 40 children's Bibles.

In one class, five children each week are allowed to take a Bible home. They must read a story every night and learn one by heart.

One child loved the Bible so much he read 10 stories a night.

Bibles are brought back to church the following Sunday.

Children's hands shoot up as they offer to retell stories they had read and knew inside out.

Stories such as David and Goliath, Noah's Ark, Jacob and Joseph are told with pride, clarity and accuracy.

The Bibles are passed to another child.

Children can wait around six months for their turn to take one home.

One child said, 'The Bible tells me about God's love.'

Another said, 'We love the pictures, and the stories teach us good behaviour'.

A very little boy added, 'We know these stories off by heart and they help us trust in God.'

Clapperton, who leads Bible Society work in Malawi, said, 'I remember one of the first churches we went to. We brought 120 Bibles, which we thought was quite a large number. When we got there, we found there were 750 children.

Almost every week, churches ask us for Bibles and we can't say yes to them all.

We are still just focusing on the cities because the need is so great.

But we believe we are sowing seeds.

We trust God the seeds will germinate and grow, and these children will know the foundation of God's word in their lives.'

Let us Pray: Thank you Lord that thousands of children are receiving God's word.

We pray that the stories in the Scriptures they read will touch their lives and encourage them to follow and rely upon Jesus Christ.

AMEN

I don't know about you, but the stories in the scriptures that I learned as a child helped to lead me to faith. And words from childhood songs reinforced what I learned and loved and have stayed with me through the years – songs like –

Tell me the stories of Jesus, I love to hear,
Things I would ask Him to tell me if He were here.

AND

God has given us a book full of stories, which was made for His people of old.
It begins with the tale of a garden and ends with the city of gold.

Here's the last of the stories from the Bible Society– and it remind us of how important it is to tell the Bible stories.

Story from England and Wales

ENGLAND & WALES

In a garage at the edge of the Forest of Dean stands Dennis the Donkey.

Bright-eyed and pink-tongued, he is the star in assemblies at a local primary school.

Beside Dennis, who's actually made of cardboard, is a whale (to devour Jonah), a roll-out temple and other props used by Bible Society's Open the Book volunteers who are invited to schools to dramatise Bible stories.

Cyril Twist, a retired chartered engineer who makes the props, said,

'When we did the story about Jesus healing the blind man, I made a chocolate paste as the mud to go over the blind man's eyes. The children loved that!'

He added that a group of boys came up to him after one assembly and said they wanted to be Christians.

About 10 of them then started attending church.

Cyril also recounted a very special moment.

He said, 'We also had a very dramatic story of a little girl who kept going home after assemblies and saying to her parents, "God loves us and God loves you too, Mummy and Daddy." And one day, the father gave his heart to Jesus.'

Cyril added, 'That was absolutely profound. You always wonder if they really get the story. But this shows that absolutely, they do.'

Let us Pray:

Heavenly Father, thank you for saving us by grace through faith in Jesus.

Help us to pass down to the next generation a legacy of faith and the truth of the gospel.

AMEN

Heavenly Father, Thank you for the gift of the Bible, for the stories passed down through hundreds and thousands of years. Thank you for everyone who told the stories, wrote them down or translated them so that we could hear them, read them, learn to love them, and share your good news with others.

AMEN

And so, as we prepare to hear what Andrew has been given to bring to us this morning we sing together -

SERMON – see Bible Society pages below.

RESPONSIVE Prayer: I read the normal and you the italics

God of Love, The Bible tells us that you made the world and everything in it.

Help us to take care of all that you have made.

The Bible tells us stories of mistakes and forgiveness.

Help us to see ourselves and others as you see us.

The Bible tells us of judges, kings, queens and heroes.

Give wisdom to the rulers of this and every nation.

The Bible tells us of fighting, and injustice.
Give peace to your broken world.

The Bible tells us that you are always with us, to the end of time.
Help us to work with you to build your kingdom.

The Bible tells us to love one another.
Help us to be kind, and to stand up for all those who cannot stand up for themselves.

The Bible tells us that you have a purpose for each of us.
Help us to be all that you created us to be.

***Our Lord God, thank you for your guidance for life which we find in the Scriptures.
Help us to search your word to gain more insight as to who you are
and more understanding of your will for each one of us.
Give us an increasing desire to read, obey,
and find nourishment through the Bible.
Amen.***

And so it's goodbye for today. May you know God's grace and love and comfort through the week ahead, until we meet again next Sunday.

For Reflection and Discussion

Read Nehemiah 8:1-12

1. Have you experienced any life-changing experiences through reading the Bible or known God's direction through any specific Bible passage? What role did other people play in you discerning God's will through His word.
2. After listening to or reading the transcript of Andy's sermon today, is there a next step we think we should be taking with God's word? (A study course, reading books to help us interpret the Bible, join a study group, use internet resources are just some examples.)
3. How can the Bible provide a safe place to process our experiences and face our fears together?

SERMON

GATHERING AROUND GOD'S WORD

How the Bible can renew God's people post-lockdown (Nehemiah 8.1–12)

INTRODUCTION

Our world has faced unprecedented levels of disruption recently. At times, it's been like living on the film set of an apocalyptic movie. The coronavirus has reminded us of our fragility. We are not in control of the universe as much as we thought we were and we need each other more than we realise we did. Now, as we seek to rebuild following a period of major disruption and with many uncertainties still ahead, how can God's people experience spiritual renewal together? And where can we find the resources we need to face a brave new world with courage?

This Bible Sunday is an opportunity to reflect on these questions by gathering around the Bible. I want to focus on a particular story captured in the book of Nehemiah in the Old Testament. As I've considered this passage it has felt so pertinent to our context. At the heart of it is a story of Israel recovering from a time of major disruption and experiencing spiritual renewal through God's word.

THE BACK STORY OF EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

First, let's consider the back story that frames Nehemiah 8 in its original context. It's the fifth century BC and the Israelites have recently been through the traumatic experience of exile. A century or so ago, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and forced the majority of its inhabitants out of their homeland. By the rivers of Babylon they sat down and wept in a foreign land. Exile in Babylon proved to be an incredibly tough experience. However, fast-forward 70 years and the Persians took over from the Babylonians and allowed the exiles to return home. So in several waves, the Israelites returned to

Jerusalem and began to rebuild their old lives. If exile was tough, trying to get back to a new normal amid so much uncertainty was even harder. Perhaps that sounds familiar? Lockdown was hard but rebuilding on the other side feels even more challenging. However, when the great leader Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem he managed to mobilise the inhabitants to action, the walls of the city were rebuilt and the people began to feel secure again. Take heart. With God on our side, the rubble can be raw material and the ruin can once again feel like home.

With the physical fabric rebuilt, this is where the key character in our passage fits in. Ezra also returned to Jerusalem and worked with Nehemiah. He had a different skill set. Nehemiah was a visionary leader. Ezra was a Bible teacher. In Nehemiah 8, it is Ezra who takes the lead as God's people regather around God's word:

NEHEMIAH 8.1–10 (selected verses, NIV)

All the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel. 2 So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. 3 He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law ... [Then] the Levites ... instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. 8 They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read. 9 Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the

Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, 'This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep.' For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.¹⁰ Nehemiah said, 'Go and enjoy choice food and sweet wine, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.'

This passage shows three ways that the Bible enables spiritual renewal:

1. THE BIBLE IS A DIVINE WATERING HOLE

Nehemiah 8.1-3

Have you ever seen animals gathering at a watering hole?

Our family recently had the privilege of visiting Kenya and enjoying a few days on safari. Early one morning we witnessed a whole array of animals arriving at a watering hole to drink. The source of H²O became a gathering point for a remarkable diversity of creatures.

- **The Bible is for all God's people**

After the trauma of exile and the exhaustion of rebuilding Jerusalem, the people of Israel were thirsty. They needed to drink again from the truth of God's word. So they asked Ezra to bring out the 'Book of Moses' and to read it to them. We are not sure which sections of the Torah Ezra read. Perhaps Deuteronomy? Either way, Ezra read from Israel's sacred Scriptures and they lapped it up. Did you notice who attended this public reading of Scripture and where they gathered? Instead of meeting in the rebuilt Temple where only Jewish males could enter, they assembled in a public square so that everyone could come and listen – men and women, young and old, literate and illiterate. Rarely in the Bible is there a display of such diversity and it's the Bible that provided the gathering point.

- **The Bible is for all humanity**

Too often we place unnecessary restrictions around

the Bible. We position it as a technical book for priests or a scholarly book for academics. However, the Bible is a divine watering hole that gives meaning, strength and hope to thirsty souls. As families, we can gather round the Bible – it's for adults and kids. As churches we can gather round the Bible – it speaks truth whether on Zoom or in the room together. It's a source of wisdom, comfort and hope for all humanity.

My wife went for a drink with some friends recently who were not Christians. As they talked, it became clear that for a couple of them, lockdown had been traumatic. As the lid lifted and the emotions poured out, my wife was able to offer prayer and later texted a verse from the Bible over as a source of strength.

We mustn't leave the Bible locked up in the Temple. More than ever we need to offer the Bible to our thirsty world. That starts by centring our own lives on the Bible. Why not invite others to read it together as the people did with Ezra? If we are to be spiritually renewed through challenging times we need God's word.

Application question: How can we centre ourselves on the Bible and invite others to join us at the watering hole?

2. THE BIBLE IS A LARGER STORY THAT GIVES HOPE

Nehemiah 8.5-8

A while ago I met with some leaders from across the Middle East. One of them shared movingly about his work with refugees. He described one occasion when a shipment of clothing arrived. Having arranged the clothes in the warehouse, he also put a stack of Arabic and Farsi Bibles next to them. When they opened the doors and word got round, there was a stampede... not for the clothes but for the Bibles! The refugees knew that when life is tough and fragile, the Bible is a unique source of hope.

- **The Bible helps makes sense of us**

As the Israelites listened to Ezra reading the Torah, it was clearly a powerful experience. Imagine the scene. Nehemiah 8 records it in a cinematic way. Ezra stood on a large platform built especially for the occasion. Thousands gathered round and as he read from the 'Book of Moses'. You could have heard a pin drop as young and old listened attentively to the Scriptures. What was it that was so captivating? After all, for us there is always more to watch on Netflix. Why bother with the Bible? Perhaps the key for Israel and for us is that the Bible helps us feel part of a larger story that makes sense of our experiences. As Ezra read Israel's history, including God rescuing Israel from slavery in Egypt, making a covenant with them on Mount Sinai and declaring them his 'special treasure' (Exodus 19), taking care of them in the wilderness when they were vulnerable, this wasn't just dusty old history. It was their story. As Ezra read extracts of the Bible, the Israelites felt part of something solid and certain. It gave them confidence to face their challenges knowing that God would be faithful through it all.

This is why we need the Bible. As the coronavirus exposes our fragilities, the Bible reminds us that we are part of a larger story, stretching back to creation and forward to a new creation. We may experience some chaos in the middle but the great author has an overarching plan that will not fail and promises to take care of his people. You won't get that from Netflix. It's why we need the Scriptures. The title of a book I've been writing captures the heart of it: THE BIBLE: A story that makes sense of life.

- **We need help to make sense of the Bible**

That said, have you noticed that sometimes the Bible doesn't easily make sense? It can be pretty complex and knotty, even disturbing. If you've experienced that, you're in good company. As the crowds listened attentively to Ezra reading the Scriptures there were clearly moments when they found it confusing. So as well as reading the text, the Levites and others trained in the Torah went out among the crowd 'making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read' (verse 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.

Today, there are great resources that make the Bible more accessible. Bible Project in America has provided really helpful videos. Closer to home, Bible Society's online shop has books and resources that can really help. One resource, called *The Bible Course*, helps ordinary people make sense of the Bible. Bible Society has now invested in a whole new edition of *The Bible Course*. Over eight sessions it shows how the whole Bible forms one big story. There are plenty of good resources to draw on to help make sense of the Bible.

Application Question: What's your next step to become more confident with the Bible?

3. THE BIBLE HELPS US CULTIVATE TRUE COMMUNITY

Nehemiah 8.9–12

When I was at university, I invited one of my rugby teammates to a Christian event. After a bold talk from the Bible, I felt awkward and wondered what my non-Christian friend made of it. "So what did you think of that?" I asked, bracing myself for the reply. None came. Instead, as I looked across my friend was crying. The Bible is surprisingly powerful. It gets under our skin and moves us in ways no other book can. Later that evening, my friend gave his life to Jesus Christ and today he is leading a Christian youth project in London.

- **The Bible can help us process our emotions**

After Ezra had finished reading, he suddenly realised that the people had started crying. They got so emotional that Nehemiah stepped in to try and coax them out of it: 'Do not mourn or weep' ... Nehemiah said, 'Go and enjoy choice food and sweet wine.' That's an unusual request for a leader to make! Where did all their emotion come from? Remember, the Israelites faced major loss, disruption and uncertainty but had to keep going through it all. As the Bible was read it was like the lid was lifted. They encountered words of comfort and hope. They may also have felt a sense of conviction and remorse. Either way, Scripture created a safe space that allowed emotions to surface and deeper things to be discussed.

As a society we've been through a lot recently.

We've experienced loss and high levels uncertainty. We probably don't realise how much we've been holding in and the toll it's taken. In the context of community, the Bible can help us express our emotions as part of a process of healing and renewal.

I was on a Zoom call with some friends and we were reading a passage of the Bible in Colossians. It included the phrase "let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts" (Colossians 3.15). One after another we began to share with each other how much we longed for this inner peace in the face of struggles. Some were experiencing bereavement, others had lost their jobs, and still others were finding homeschooling hugely stressful. Soon there were tears as grown adults found a safe and honest space opened up to express how we were really feeling.

- **The Bible can help us become more generous**

Nehemiah 8 finishes with a scene of celebration, as tears of sorrow transition to feasting and rejoicing. As Nehemiah famously put it: 'The joy of the LORD is your strength.' The Israelites responded by putting the Scriptures into practice and shared what they had with the poor and those in need (8.10). One thing the pandemic has taught us is to be aware of our neighbours' pain and to show kindness, support and concern for each other.

After a period of disruption, God's people experienced a new depth of community as they gathered around God's word. Over the next few months, no doubt we will have reason to cry together and celebrate together, lament and laugh. As we do so, we will discover that vulnerability and generosity are the keys to authentic community, whether in the room or on Zoom. Healing and renewal come when we gather around God's word together.

Application Question: How can the Bible provide a safe place to process our experiences and face our fears together?

RESPONSE

In Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, a poignant conversation takes place. Frodo says, 'I wish the ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened.' Gandalf replies, 'So do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All you have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to you.' We may not choose these times, but we can make the most of them by gathering around God's word and experiencing spiritual renewal.

Dr Andrew Ollerton is a theologian and pastor who created *The Bible Course* (Bible Society) and is author of a new book *The Bible: a Story that Makes Sense of Life* (Hodder & Stoughton).