

## SERMON

“And Jesus began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

Just a few simple words which introduced one of the Scripture readings which Burry shared with us this morning. But how often do words in Scripture remain just that for us.....words.....printed flat and black on a page....Do we regularly experience that “fulfilment” or “coming to pass” which Jesus is speaking of, or even true understanding or revelation?

The question which I'd like us to think about this morning is “How DO we allow the Word of God to speak to us?” And coupled with that, what do we do if we find **ourselves** reacting like those people in the Nazareth synagogue.....struggling with the Word of God when it doesn't conform to our own preconceptions or expectations?

Words themselves can convey all manner of things. There's the story about the minister who goes to visit one of his parishioners, and she offers him a glass of cherry brandy, which he is very partial to. “Now remember, minister”, she says, “if you accept this, I want you to acknowledge it publicly at Sunday's service. I want you to tell the folks that you've had some of my cherry brandy.”

So he thinks for a minute, realising that some of his elders have rather strict views about the drinking of alcohol.....However, the top of the bottle is already off; the bouquet of that lovely fruity aroma is already wafting its way up his nostrils.....and he accepts.

Come Sunday the minister stands up in the pulpit and says to his congregation, “I would like to thank Mrs McGillicuddy for the fruit which she gave me.....and for the spirit in which it was given.....”

And I wonder if biblical text can be a bit like this..... its depth of meaning as well as its nuances can often elude us. And without doubt there is an onus on us as Christians, to seek and to search within it, using those gifts of understanding which God has given us.

We know from Scripture that God often had to give his prophets a bit of a shove, and it is good if we stay alert to those times when he gives US a bit of a nudge too.

When God appointed Jeremiah to be a prophet to the nations, *he* responded just as Moses had when God called him.....We can just imagine him taking a step backwards “Me? Oh, no, Lord, you’ve got it wrong. / don’t know what to say. I’m no orator. I’m far too young.”

Jeremiah is a very human prophet who becomes committed to a calling which tears him apart and makes him feel totally inadequate at times. But from the beginning he had God’s promise “ Don’t be frightened of the people, because I am with you and will protect you.”

Where does that leave US, in our search for an answer to the question, “How do WE allow the Word of God to speak to US?”

Perhaps *this* was at the heart of Christ’s frustration with the people of his own home town of Nazareth, because their hearts and minds seemed to be closed to what he had to say; their preconceptions and ingrained prejudices did not allow any *freshness* of thought or enlightenment. Any possibility for discernment or insight was stifled in such an unyielding atmosphere.

Theologian Daniel Migliore says this: “According to the New Testament witness, the revelation of God is decisively embodied in Jesus Christ. HE is God’s light in a world of darkness. In him God has been reliably and definitively revealed.

If we take this view into account, then we begin to realise the tremendous importance of our relationship with Christ, who is God made flesh, as we involve ourselves in Scripture.

And it IS about a relationship with those words on the page, and the meaning contained in them for us.....as we read and weave our way through the poetry, the drama, the passion.

But Migliore goes on to say that “ God is free and ever-surprising “ and if we look to the crucified and risen Christ, then God will always be a “disturbing and disruptive reality in our lives.”

Does OUR God continue to surprise US? Do we find OUR thoughts disturbed or our lives disrupted as we immerse ourselves in the Word of God?

The stories which we read or have read to us, are not just interesting narratives put there to inform us or entertain us. Their purpose is to engage, to liberate and transform us.

Scripture demands a personal response from me so that I will open my mind and my heart and lean ever closer in relationship with the God who is revealed within its pages.

Lean in that way which we read about in the Gospel of John, when the beloved disciple leans on the bosom of Jesus.

The Washington Post recently organized a social experiment about people’s perceptions, tastes and priorities when they were under stress and in a hurry.

On a cold, January morning at a metro station in Washington DC, a man with a violin played 6 pieces from Bach, for 45 minutes. About 2000 people went through the station during that time yet only 6 stopped to hear the music.

Interestingly, several children tried to stop and listen but they were hurried on by adults anxious to get to their destination. There was no applause when the man stopped and no recognition of what he had been doing.

That violinist was Joshua Bell, one of the greatest musicians in the world playing some of the most intricate pieces ever written. His violin was worth 3 and a half million dollars.

This story made me wonder just how much I miss when I rush on through God's written Word and through life in general, failing to take time to stop and look and listen for God in unexpected places, when he is reaching out to me, longing to communicate and express his love.

We can visualise Jesus standing in the synagogue in Nazareth, unrolling the scroll and beginning to read.....The people settle down to hear the familiar words, and yet there is something about this carpenter whom they know so well, which holds their attention. We are told that when he sat down to begin speaking "The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him."

At first they were "amazed" at his grace and eloquence, but it wasn't long until the mood changed, as Jesus began to question their entrenched beliefs.....that they were God's chosen people and Gentiles were far beneath them and of little account.

For this young man to suggest that the Gentiles could be favoured by God was a step too far for them and this was a message which was totally unacceptable.

It was this hardness of hearts and the narrow- mindedness which so frustrated Jesus; no doubt it saddened him greatly too, because he had grown up with these people and knew them well.

William Barclay makes an interesting comparison between the preaching styles of John the Baptist and Jesus.....John was a preacher of doom. (Those of you old enough to remember *Dad's Army* on television will remember John Laurie's familiar cry of "We're doomed! We're doomed!")

Anyone hearing John's message must have quaked in their boots. Compare that to the Gospel, when Jesus preached love, compassion and forgiveness.....Barclay says that Jesus knew about the wrath of God too, but it was always a wrath based in love.

Jesus was unique in introducing the notion of a *Fatherly* love in God. Devout Muslims love their God, and have some 39 different ways of addressing him. But they do not have the concept of "Father". Christ alone revealed a new intimacy about God's Fatherhood, and with it he brings us a whole new way of revelation and understanding whenever we engage with the Word of God.

It is our relationship with the Father which shapes our theology and faith; intellect and past experience play their part, but it is important to allow God to shape our understandings of experience, rather than to allow our experiences to shape our understanding of God.

Poet and novelist Evelyn Underhill said that "Most of our difficulties come from trying to deal with the spiritual and the practical aspects of our lives separately. Instead, we should realise that they are parts of one whole."

We have to allow God to be in our lives and our living; we have to invite him in. Vital though it is to pray, and to read Scripture, there is another intangible element in the equation which we see when the Psalmist says to God, "Open the eyes of my heart, Lord, so that I may see you."

God seeks partnership with us and yet paradoxically, the people in the synagogue who were so outraged at Jesus' teaching were actually rejecting him to the extent that they tried to kill him.

Emotionally and spiritually they were so blinkered and 'closed' that they attempted to push the Son of God off a cliff. It was Augustine who said, "Without God we cannot; without us he will not."

Returning to the question of our own struggles with texts which puzzle us, disturb us or even make us gasp in disbelief at times...initially they can be a bit like that annoying piece of jigsaw puzzle which at first glance looks as if it should slot in, but no amount of pressing or turning round will get it to fit.

It's only once the puzzle is complete, with every piece in its correct place, that the picture looks right; and we realise that we were wrong to try to force something in where it did not belong.

A friend of mine who is a devout Roman Catholic lost her husband and then her best friend within a matter of months and I remember her saying to me, "I'm very angry with God just now."

The artist and once director of the Leprosy Mission Eddie Askew agrees with this kind of theology; "Our discipleship shouldn't make us unthinking zombies, accepting everything which happens without question," he says. We have a right, even a duty, to use the minds which God gave us.

We know that Jeremiah didn't want anything to do with God's plans to start with, and he told him so.

Abraham stood up to God and bargained with him.

We've already mentioned Moses, who also argued with God and raised objections and negotiated with Him.

Think of Job, who complained bitterly to God and even the psalmists took God to task at times.

Remember Jacob wrestling through the night, finally realising that he has been wrestling with God, who gives him a new name, Israel, which means “the one who wrestles with God .”

God loves us, and hopefully there *will* be times when his Word will provoke us so that it disturbs our complacency, offering us new direction and deeper insight into that relationship with him that he wants to enrich.

If, like the Nazarenes, we maintain a carapace around ourselves so that there is no dialogue or relationship between ourselves and God, then his Holy Word will not penetrate our souls and they will remain dull, stifled and unenlightened.

Here are some words written by Martin Luther ~

“Those who have any kind of love and desire for the Word of God  
Should gratefully acknowledge that that these attitudes are poured into  
them by the Holy Spirit.

For we are not born with these attitudes and cannot acquire them  
through the law.

This transformation rests completely and absolutely in the hand of the  
Almighty.”

To Him be all glory and praise, world without end, Amen.