

SERMON FOR FAMILY EUCHARIST AT ST JAMES CHURCH, COLWALL
on 23rd January 2010
(week after Haiti earthquake)

Nehemiah 8: 1-10, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31, Luke 4:14-21

“Grateful and galvanised!”

Every weekend I open the *Church Times* and read it, more or less, from beginning to end. I must confess this is more of a duty than a joy. This weekend I got stuck on page 2. There is only one article on page 2! It is about the effect of sermons. The headline is “Preachers find congregations grateful but not galvanised.” It is about the results of a recent survey on the effect of sermons. It contains some interesting statistics (quote re Baptists etc.). Much more worrying is the fact that only 16% felt that sermons helped them understand the new or current issues (for Anglicans 32% - well done!). The report says that it is clear that sermons “are not challenging people to go out and look at the world differently or to live differently.” Such has been the impact of this survey that a Good Preaching Pledge has been launched, signed by more than 25 church leaders, including our own. It states (quote) ... That is quite a challenge – I’ll do my best, God willing!

(<http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/content.asp?id=87992>)

When I first began training for Reader ministry, I had no idea how to go about it – despite having heard hundreds of sermons in my lifetime and despite a lot of instruction during training on how to do it. No comments on whether I’ve learnt anything at all in the intervening years please! However two things did stick from the training. One was John Saxby’s advice that you should think about: “What kind of God you are preaching about, what does this God feel about the congregation you are preaching to and what does he expect them to do.” The other was someone who wrote: “People should not go out of church thinking ‘That was a nice sermon’. They should go out thinking ‘I’ll do something about that!’” It is this aspect that, according to the survey and the new pledge, seems to be missing or missed (more about this in a moment).

Nowadays a sermon is about 10 minutes – don’t make more than 3 points – remember to include some humour – try to include some topical references, etc. 2 of our readings today describe the Jewish model – reading of the Torah and then its interpretation by teachers. Jesus himself “teaches” much more than he “preaches”. This is an interesting and subtle distinction. The root of the word “teach” is “to show” or “to show the way”. The root of the word “preach” is “to proclaim”. There is quite a difference between them. In an Elizabethan congregation you might have found your priest so ignorant that they were restricted to reading homilies written by someone else – or so very erudite that, like John Donne, sermons were “like the peace of God – passing all understanding”. If you were a Georgian, you would feel entitled to throw things if you didn’t agree with the sermon. In Victorian times some congregations were capable of listening to several hours of theological discourse and could quote verbatim from the sermon when engaging in discussion after wards – no, don’t get up!

Back to survey – specifically that the sermon should help you to “understand events” and “actually change the way you live” - that you should in fact to galvanised by it. What will you “get out of” this sermon? Is a sermon a kind of divine take-away service from which you expect to go home with practically packaged nourishment of the kind that you have ordered? I often think that in a bizarre way, it is – but it is not me who is doing the packaging. Every preacher will tell you that people do not

actually hear what you preached about. This can be very annoying when they disagree violently with something you haven't actually said. However I personally would rather people disagreed because that provokes them to think about what they do actually believe. I think God speaks to individuals through the sermon with the message that he intends them to hear, whatever the intentions of the preacher may be. The wants, needs and intentions of the listeners are an active, not a passive, ingredient of preaching. 84% thought that the sermon should be closely connected with the Bible. So - here are 2 points about the readings today and what we might do as a result of hearing them.

The reading from Nehemiah is about paying attention to God's word – in worship and in our life beyond it. The Jews have returned from their long exile to re-establish not just their physical environment by rebuilding Jerusalem and the temple but also to restore their relationship with God from which they had exiled themselves. John Stendahl says: "The passage in Nehemiah describes a great liturgy, a public act whereby the whole nation is reconstituted and rededicated by the covenant and the presence of God. They greet, they bless, they worship, they listen. They are bidden to turn their tears to joy and to eat and drink in one vast and scattered banquet. The Torah makes them a people again." Right now, as we approach a general election, we should be thinking about what will reconstitute and rededicate this nation and make us one people again. Such considerations should direct the choices we make because we have passed the point at which "religion and politics don't mix". Indeed we have reached a point at which there is enormous pressure for religious belief – and particularly Christianity – to be a private habit rather than a public choice. Unfortunately it has become the choice of Anglicans to collude with this – we avoid the excesses of public proclamation of faith which embarrass us so much in other denominations and countries. Our challenge is to do something about this. When I was training for ordination I found the following definition:

"We are not ordaining you to ministry: that happened at your baptism.
We are not ordaining you to be a caring person: you are already called to that.
We are not ordaining you to serve the church in committees, activities, organisation: that is implied by your membership.
We are not ordaining you to become involved in social issues, ecology, race, politics, revolution, for that is laid upon every Christian.
We are ordaining you to something smaller and less spectacular: to read and interpret those sacred stories of our community, so that they speak a word to people today."

(*Called to Something Smaller, Methodist Church of Singapore, Liturgy of Life*).

When Bishop Anthony first came to our diocese he exhorted us to tell our stories boldly. One commentator on this passage says: "we should not lose the point of the ancient compilers, namely, that spiritual and religious reform go hand in hand with political, social, and economic reconstruction." Otherwise we will be left with dead text, not living scripture. Dead lives, not living witness. It is time for Christians to turn themselves inside out – to show on the outside when we believe on the inside and not "to keep the rumour of God alive" but to say, as Jesus does, "today this has been fulfilled in your hearing".

The second point that struck me most vividly was that Nehemiah was a rebuildler. In the face of unparalleled disaster, he encouraged his people to begin reconstruction. If our Christian faith is to have any effect it must relate to the news and issues of today. When an event like the earthquake in Haiti occurs, belief in God is under attack – not in the sense that some have been preaching, that disaster is literally a punishment earned by those who suffer, but because we preach a God of love, who surely cannot want to inflict this kind of suffering. Where was that God when we

needed him, people ask? Practically it goes almost without saying that Christians are bound to and will respond with the physical help that is needed. But what about the spiritual issues? How did this disaster come about? If there is sin, where is it located? I was very moved this week when a colleague, a Geography teacher, addressed the school about the earthquake. She was not trying to encourage fund-raising – that goes without saying. She was making the point that Haiti has been vulnerable for a very long time and is and always has plagued by injustice and ignored by the rest of the world. If we had done more, sooner, she said, Haiti would have been better able to cope with the physical disasters that have struck it. It is not emergency aid that is needed but an on-going fundamental change of attitude towards supporting Haiti and so many other vulnerable communities throughout the world. Christians should not be quiet about this. They should not only do the practical things that they are already doing, but they should make much more public noises about the greed, selfishness and irresponsibility of the rich nations. And where is the sin? In Haiti over 90% of the wealth is owned by 1% of the population. “I come to bring good news to the poor”, Jesus read. And then he taught: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

The Gospel reading leaves us on a knife-edge – like the folk of Nazareth, how are we going to react? If we are the body of Christ, here and now, as Paul asserts, we are also the ones who must fulfil in the world God’s living word. Today. Amen. Amen.

RESEARCH:

Nehemiah

Standing to receive the word – Ezra and Jesus
Watergate?!

- we should not lose the point of the ancient compilers, namely, that spiritual and religious reform go hand in hand with political, social, and economic reconstruction.
- God’s word in scripture is not seen as fixed, immutable, or unchanging, at least not in terms of its relevance and understanding.
- in the new context needs fresh interpretation, a fresh application to the present world, taking into consideration the new social, economic, and political system, and the new religious context.
- Ezra does not force the law upon them, they desire to hear and understand it.
- In his autobiography *Surprised By Joy* CS Lewis describes joy as "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. . . I doubt whether anyone who has tasted it would ever, if both were in his power, exchange it for all the pleasures in the world."

John Stendahl is pastor of the Lutheran Church of the Newtons in Newton Centre, Massachusetts.

- The passage in Nehemiah describes a great liturgy, a public act whereby the whole nation is reconstituted and rededicated by the covenant and the presence of God. They greet, they bless, they worship, they listen. They are bidden to turn their tears to joy and to eat and drink in one vast and scattered banquet. The Torah makes them a people again. "This day," says Nehemiah, "is holy to our Lord."

Corinthians – effect of disunity

Untamed Hospitality by Elizabeth Newman

- While our culture reduces “hospitality” to friendliness and private entertaining, Christian hospitality remains a public and economic reality by which God re-creates us through the places and people we are given. How do we shift gears to practice this untamed hospitality?
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer rightly reminds us, life together in Christ is not “an ideal but a Divine reality.”⁴ Life together is not an ideal that we must strive to realize; it is rather a reality that God creates through Christ in which we are invited to participate. Far from being otherworldly, this Christ-centered hospitality is as deeply worldly as is possible since through it we are enabled to see and live in the world truthfully—seeing Christ in the poor, the hungry, and the naked, and addressing their physical needs (Matthew 25).
- However, that economics and hospitality are both related to *oikos*, the Greek word for “household,” gives us a different perspective. Rightly understood, “hospitality” names the kind of giving and receiving that enables the *oikos* or household to flourish, and “economics” describes the rules that govern this practice. As we will see, the kind of *oikos* we envision as our primary dwelling makes all the difference in the world for how we understand and practice hospitality.
- <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/53382.pdf>

The Old Testament Readings: Weekly Comments on the Revised Common Lectionary, Theological Hall of the Uniting Church, Melbourne, Australia.

- Good news is only good news when it meets the needs of the people. As Edward Markquart states in the course *Witnesses for Christ*:
 “God’s story is always related to human need. For example, if a woman is dying of cancer, the gospel is God’s strong word of resurrection. If a person is permeated with guilt, the gospel is God’s assurance of forgiveness. If people experience extreme suffering, the gospel is the prayer: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble.” For the starving, the gospel may be bread. For a homeless refugee, the gospel may be freedom in a new homeland. For others, the gospel may be freedom from political tyranny. The gospel is always related to human need. It is never truth in a vacuum, a theologically true statement which may or may not relate to one’s life. The gospel is God’s truth, God’s message, God’s action, God’s word to a particular person, to a particular need, to a particular historical situation. You don’t throw a drowning person sandwich. However good the sandwich may be, it just doesn’t meet that person’s need. You throw a drowning person a life jacket or a lifeline, or you dive in for the rescue. So it is with the gospel. The gospel is God’s truth, God’s action, aimed at a particular human need.”

Brian P. Stoffregen Exegetical Notes at Crossmarks:

- Note the repetition of words in this short section:
 he has sent // to send away (*apostello*)
 to proclaim // to proclaim (*kerysso*)
 release // release (or forgiveness) (*aphesis*)
- **Today** is an important word for Luke. It occurs 12 times in Luke and only 9 times in the other three gospels combined. It occurs in such familiar passages as: “**Today** in the town of David a Savior has been born to you.” “**Today** you will be with me in paradise.” And twice in the Zacchaeus story: “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay in your house **today**.” And, “**Today**, salvation has come to this house.” And in our text: “**Today** this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”
- For Luke **today** is a moment of radical change.