

Bible Sunday
23rd October 2011

Reading: Nehemiah 8:1-12

What's the background to this reading from Nehemiah? Virtually all the Jews had been thrown out of their country and had been slaves in Iraq for at least 50 years. Now, they have been allowed home, but it's a smashed up country. Jerusalem, especially, has been destroyed, and so they begin the dreary job of rebuilding the walls of the city. Nehemiah's job is to head that up, and he has to cope with lots of hostility and cynicism: "What's the point of it all? Things will never be as good as they used to be." But they finish the walls and then they decide to assemble to hear God's word, the Bible, or the section they had at that time. So they build a platform out in a busy market square, by their new walls and gates, and Ezra the priest comes out with the scrolls. And look how they react! It's not rehearsed, but as he unrolls the scroll they all stand up in awe of God's word. They shout, "Amen, Amen!" in response to Ezra's praise of God, raise their hands, and then kneel down. And as it's read there are tears at hearing God's word and letting it sink in, and there's huge joy too: joy because God has brought them home, joy because they are hearing the word of their God, and joy because, we're told, they can understand it. There should be both tears and joy when we read and apply God's word.

So what's the point for us of reading the Bible? Surely to work out for ourselves what we believe, to understand God more and his plans for us, and for him to speak to us. It's like our food: we need it regularly. Getting our Bible food only on Sundays in church would be like having only one meal a week: you wouldn't grow on that - you'd starve. And, also, relying on other people to read the Bible and explain it to us is rather like sitting at table watching other people eat, and hoping that somehow we'll benefit from the food they are getting, without eating anything ourselves.

Carrying on the food analogy, reading the Bible is sometimes like some fantastic new food, when you understand something new and exciting, or when God seems to speak straight to you through a passage in the Bible. But most of the time reading the Bible is just humdrum, like the ordinary food we eat every day to keep us going: necessary, but unexciting. And yet it builds us up. And sometimes it's like medicine: maybe necessary, but unpleasant: we can't seem to understand it at all, it goes over our head, or it just doesn't seem to say anything to us. Jesus was steeped in the Bible. If we read the Bible very little, we probably won't grow in our faith much.

So what helps us with reading the Bible? What helps us understand it and apply it to ourselves? I hope sermons in church do. Also, having a Study Bible helps, as that has notes and comments on the Bible text. Also, using daily Bible notes. These give you a short passage to read each day and then provide some comments, and explain difficult bits. It's exciting how God can speak through that. Commentaries on particular books of the Bible are also very helpful; I've got quite a lot of commentaries and people borrow them. Home groups are wonderful, too, as you hear other people's points of view, and together you come to an understanding of a passage. That's exciting. And often someone asks a question you might have been thinking about yourself. The Alpha Course can also be extremely helpful.

Vary your pattern of reading the Bible; if you find one set of Bible notes doesn't grab you, change it. If you have a smart phone, you can download Bible passages for each day. Underline passages, write down special verses, and put them up on your mirror. Memorize them. Have a concordance as that helps you find verses you vaguely know but can't track down in the Bible.

God wants to speak to us. And one of his main ways is through the Bible. It's our only objective way of checking on something we think God may be saying to us. Let's allow him to speak to us and to feed us through it.

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