

“Speak Lord for your servant is listening”

A sermon preached by the *Revd Joanna Coney* on Bible Sunday, 26th October 2012 at 10.00 am and 12.00 noon at St Peter’s, Wolvercote.

Isaiah 55, vv. 1-11; 2 Timothy 3, v. 14 to 4, v. 5; John 5, vv. 36b-47

Listening, really listening, how often do we really listen? Have you ever watched small children listening to a story – they become so caught up in it, so completely engaged with what they are hearing, that the rest of the world seems to cease to exist for them. They are totally involved and for that short time they actually become part of the story

Stories are really important to all of us – stories of all sorts – provided we really listen. Stories that help us understand our history, culture and indeed our faith. Stories that give us insights, offer us new perspectives on life and that help us make moral judgments. Above all, perhaps, the life stories of other people to which we are sometimes privileged to be given a glimpse.

And what of our own story. We all have a story, a very personal life story that is totally unique and that both defines us and goes a little way to explain to ourselves and to others who we are, what drives us and how we meet the ups and downs of life. So what of your story and my story? I suggest that most of us actually have at least two stories - the one that is the face we show to the world and the other, the real story, that God alone knows. We have an outside face – but also an inner reality.

Perhaps we sometimes need to ask ourselves - what of our story - how much of our story do we share with others – on how many levels – and how much do we keep hidden, even perhaps from ourselves. Above all, how much do we try and hide from God? What effect does our life story have on the faith and well being of others? What does our story reveal of our relationships with creation, with those around us, with those we love and those whom we find hard to love, and supremely, our relationship with God.

Maybe all good stories are like this, the face value of story that the text presents to us on the page and the many layers of inner meanings and messages that lie behind the text. All stories are, at heart, the stories of relationships, relationships between humans and the rest of creation, relationships between nations, between individuals and of course relationships between God and his people down the ages.

To day is Bible Sunday. The Bible is a collection of different ways of telling the greatest story of all, that of the revelation of God to his creation and of his relationship with his people down the ages, illustrated through the stories of not only individual people, but of nations. A story told in many forms, history, poetry, liturgy, narrative, wisdom and prophecy. A story that is absolutely basic to our faith and our understanding of God, basic to the way we make sense of the world and the basis of our own individual stories.

So how might we handle the Bible? What are we to do with this wealth of literature, all these stories? How might we respond to this ‘Bible Sunday’ invitation to reappraise how we relate to and use it? Do we see just the text, take it just as it is and go no further, or do we interpret it with

all the insight and intelligence that we can, in order to find the deeper significance and to access the many layers of meaning and wisdom within and behind the text? Do we ask, what is this 'Gods story' for us today? What is our relationship with that story and how does it affect the way we live our lives day by day?

First of all I believe we need to acknowledge that our relationship with the Bible can never be one-sided. To come alive it demands our response, our reflection, and our interpretation. It also asks of us that we, like children, get so completely caught up in it, so totally engaged with it, that it demands our complete attention so that we become absorbed in it and it becomes part of us at a very deep level.

As our collect puts it we are to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest it, to

read it, yes, often and regularly, sometimes maybe in large chunks, sometimes perhaps just dwelling on a short sentence or a phrase or even just a single word, sometimes reading it with the newspaper in the other hand to hold it up against the troubles of this world, just as long as we DO read it,

mark it, to really listen to it, to engage with it and interact with it, to reflect on it with both our heads and our hearts, and to be willing to let it change us,

learn it, to study it with all our God given intelligence and learn both as much we can about it and to learn as much as we can from it, and finally to,

inwardly digest it, to internalize and absorb it into our very centre so that it affects our innermost being and becomes the deep unconscious driver to the way we live and that defines our relationships with the world around us, with other people and centrally with God himself.

The Bible has many ways of illustrating that relationship between God and his people. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, we have the history and the social norms of Israel, reflecting the nation's way of life and the development of its standards and values. This gives us the story, the record, of the spiritual wrestling, questionings, and affirmations of a deeply religious people towards a deeper understanding of God's purposes and promises. Then we have the New Testament, a collection of documents, often individual accounts, that tell us of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, the greatest revelation of all, the very heart of our faith, the story of God himself entering the world for our salvation. Then there are the records of how the young Christian Churches responded to, and attempted to interpret, just what that event might mean.

Every part of this collection of literature, speaks to us in so many ways of the will of God, the acts of God, the purposes of God, the love of God. So what truths might we find to ponder on in this morning's readings? There are of course many nuggets but I'm just going to pick a few.

Isaiah implores us to actively seek God, to return to him, for it is only with him that there is life in all its fullness. But he also warns us that 'God's Ways are not our Ways' and that if we are to claim his promise of salvation we must not delay, we must do it now. *So we ponder that while God's Promises never fail they DO demand our response.*

Timothy challenges us as to how that response might look, how we might claim this promise of salvation, and suggests that it will include remaining steadfast in our faith, being solidly grounded in Scripture, carrying out our personal ministry with energy and commitment and proclaiming to the world the message of salvation. *So we might pick out of this passage that God's gifts to us are not just for ourselves but that they are to equip us to share and spread the good news with others*

John takes this one stage further and points out that God sees our deeds as well as our intentions and that in order to become proficient, to become equipped for every good work, we are to engage both our intellect - our heads, our intelligence and our reasoning - and also our emotions - our hearts, our feelings and our love. This requires that we be so grounded in Scripture and in sound doctrine that we cannot be tempted by the values and myths of the world and be led to turn away from listening to the truth.

But while such wealth can be found in just these three short passages we have this morning, and while they offer more than ample wisdom to ponder on and digest during the week, they are still such a very small part of the whole Canon of Scripture. There is just so much in the Bible it can perhaps seem somewhat daunting and overwhelming, leaving us wondering where on earth shall we start, what shall we do with it all?

This was certainly the feelings of a class of 8 and 9 year olds whom I was teaching some years ago. So I set them a small challenge. I asked them to see which of them could sum up what the Bible was all about, what was the meaning of it all, what is it telling us, and to do so in the fewest possible number of words. Robert, a shy and normally quiet and rather sleepy lad at the back raised his hand immediately and said that he could sum up the whole Bible in just three words. His three words said it all – they were

God Loves Me.

How right he was. What we have here is indeed simply the story of God's love for us. As someone else once said to me - 'I sometimes used to feel uncomfortable knowing God was watching over me every moment of my life until I realized that he looks at me, not to judge me or to catch me out, but because he loves me so much he just can't bear to take his eyes off me for a moment.'

Amen