

Nehemiah 8

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[0 : 00] So we turn for just a few moments this evening to words which you will find in the first reading of Scripture from the book of Nehemiah, chapter 8. And I would like to draw your attention to the words at the foot of page 492 and at the top of page 493.

That's Nehemiah 8, verse 8. They read from the book of the law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.

Thus we have recorded here the earliest occasion, as far as we know, in which the Scriptures were translated.

And I think this is a very important event because the people of Israel, the people of Judah who had gone to Babylon, had in fact adopted the Aramaic language.

And although Aramaic is related to Hebrew, it is not the same language. And when they came back, they found that they could not understand the Scriptures. It's interesting that Ezra and Nehemiah and the Levites didn't say to the people, right, you've got to learn Hebrew.

[1 : 23] They said, we will translate. And we read here that they give the sense and they made it clear, giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.

I think this reminds us that the Christian faith is a missionary religion. In the truest sense of the term. And it believes that there is no holy language as such.

And that just because Jesus spoke Aramaic, he may have also spoken Greek. It doesn't mean that we have to learn Aramaic or Greek in order to be good followers of Jesus.

And here there is a marked distinction between the Christian faith and many other faiths, especially Islam. Islam tells us that if you want to pray truly, you've got to learn Arabic.

You've got to learn the language of Allah. But the Bible tells us that God, as it were, learns our language.

[2 : 28] And he causes his people to translate his word into the language of the people. I think it's very important for us to recall that.

And that our task as a Christian church is to pray and to work for that day when every language on earth may have the word of God.

And that everyone may be able to read the word of God in their heart language. In the language of the heart.

Because God speaks to our heart. God doesn't speak in an alien way. God speaks through the language of the heart. God speaks through the heart.

Many, as we've already noted, many of these returned exiles had lost their Hebrew and Babylon. And where they had adopted the Aramaic of their conquerors.

[3 : 59] So we read that the Levites translated the Hebrew scriptures as they read. Now this is, as I say, a very significant incident in the drama of redemption which the Lord records for us in the Bible.

But here we have the first of many translations of the gospel into other languages. But what we have here is more than translation.

We have here proclamation of the message. We have here the people receiving the message and celebrating it. And I would like us for a few moments to notice three aspects of this event.

The first is that not only was the law read. But that God spoke through the words of the law.

The law that was read was the word of God. And the people saw that this message in a unique sense came from the Lord.

[5 : 15] And God does communicate with human beings. And he communicates through language. He communicates in a way which is clear.

And which we can understand. Although there are many aspects of the faith that are deep. And we can never exhaust.

Yet the basic gospel is given to us in intelligible words. There's nothing supremely mystical or mysterious about them.

God has spoken. And he's spoken clearly. And the God of the Bible is a God who speaks. He's a God who works through his word.

It's by his word that he created the world. And it is by his word that he speaks to us. And he tells us of his plan of redemption.

[6 : 14] It's important for us to realize that God speaks today through his word. God did not only speak then. He also speaks today.

If you look at the letter to the Hebrews you will see where the writer quotes from Psalm 95. On one occasion he says that the Holy Spirit said these words through David.

Another occasion he says the Holy Spirit says in the present tense. And so not only did the Holy Spirit speak in the past. The Holy Spirit is speaking today through the word of God.

And that's why it's so important for us to stress the reading of the word of God. Because God does speak through it. On occasions I go to the United States and one of the things there that distresses me in many churches, many Protestant churches, is that there's scarcely any public reading of the scriptures today.

We need to ensure that there is a place for the public reading of the scriptures for its own sake. Not merely as a prelude to the sermon.

[7 : 29] But as the word of God. Which we are encouraged to listen to and to hear. And to heed the voice of God.

God speaks today. That's the title of the translation of the Bible in Spanish that is called the popular version.

Dios habla hoy. Literally God speaks today. And that's true. God does speak today through his word. The Holy Spirit who inspired the word when it was given originally.

Is the spirit who brings it to life today. And who causes it to be the voice of God to our souls. God speaks through his word.

As we've already noticed, God spoke to the people before the water gate. In the only language they understood. But he was able to do so because the Levites gave a translation from the language in which these scriptures were originally given.

[8 : 41] There's a sense in which I believe that we in the church of God are called to translate the scriptures. For those who cannot understand them.

So that they may hear God speak in their own language. The scriptures have been given to us. Not only as the word of God, but as the word of God for the people. The scriptures have been given to us. Not as some esoteric text.

Which can be understood only by those who are initiated into theology. And the far depths of theology. Calvin said, the Bible is the book of the people.

God's word is a word for all. And so, this occasion, as I've said, may well have been the first in which God's word was translated into another language.

[9 : 49] But it certainly was not the last. Roughly just over a century later, the entire Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek.

So that the growing number of Jews who spoke Greek, Hellenistic Jews, of the dispersion of the diaspora, could hear God speak to them.

And a few more centuries later, when the New Testament scriptures were given. They were given, inspired by the Spirit, not in the classical Greek of the academics of the ancient world.

But in the common Greek of the marketplace. In the popular everyday language of the Eastern Roman Empire. And these New Testament scriptures tell us that Jesus Christ commissioned his followers to make disciples of each nation.

Now the word nation there, in the original sense, is a people group. It's not the nation state of today, which was a much later development.

[11 : 00] But the Great Commission is to make disciples of all ethno-linguistic groups. And that involves translating the word of God into the heart language of the people who compose these groups.

And in fact, the vision that we have in the book of Revelation, which we read in our second reading, is of a future world order in which God will be praised in every language.

And so we have this key event, which is the first of many similar events, which have taken place since then, which are taking place today.

And please God may continue to take place until the Lord Jesus Christ comes again. Now let me emphasize that one of the factors that distinguishes the Christian faith from other world faiths is its commitment to make the gospel, the word of God, available in the language of the ordinary person. We have no holy language in Christianity. Other faiths do. If we wish to become deeply initiated into another faith, you have to learn the language of their scriptures.

[12 : 24] But Christians believe that our scriptures are to be translated into the languages of the earth. And so the great task of all those who translate the scriptures is to enable men and women the world over to hear God speak in their own language.

And often when a new translation of the scriptures is produced for the first time, there is great rejoicing, tremendous celebration among the people, because God speaks to them in their heart language.

In fact, Lamin Sane, who is a West African scholar at Yale, argues that the translation of the scriptures has done more to help indigenize African languages than anything else, because it has enabled people to hear God speak in their heart language.

And so, the first point that I want to emphasize here is that when the scriptures are read, God speaks through them.

God speaks through the scriptures. And let us always place, make a very high place, a very central space for the reading of the scriptures in public and in private.

[14 : 01] God speaks through the scriptures. But secondly, the second point that we notice here is that the congregation hears. Not only does God speak, but the congregation hears.

God speaks through the scriptures.

Now, your responsibility and my responsibility as a member of a worshipping congregation is to hear. The church is, above anything else, an acoustic community.

Now, when we speak about the acoustics of a congregation, we think of the architecture of the building. But I believe that God is much more concerned about how the congregation hears.

We are called to live and worship in response to hearing the word of God. And we come together in order to hear.

[15 : 24] Now, often, after a service today, people, we may meet someone who wasn't able to be in church, and they may ask us, how did the preacher preach? And that's a fair question.

But the Puritans used to ask another question. They used to ask each other, how did you hear? Hearing is vitally important.

Preaching will be of no avail unless we hear. And so we are called upon to be an acoustic community, and a community that lives in response to the word of God.

And that we hear the word of God, we believe the word of God, we heed the word of God, we obey the word of God.

Hearing the word of God is the very nerve center of congregational life, and indeed of individual spiritual life as well. People in our scientific culture today say that seeing is believing.

[16 : 33] Well, in a sense, that may be true, but in the Bible, hearing is believing. Faith comes by hearing, says Paul, and hearing by the word of Christ.

Faith comes by hearing. There's a great deal of emphasis in the Bible on hearing. The great Shema in the Old Testament, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. Has become the Jewish confession of faith. And as they confess that, they are making a commitment to hear the Lord their God.

You find that Shema in Deuteronomy chapter 6, verses 4 to 9. And when Paul wrote to the Galatians, he challenged them as to how they had come to faith.

There were problems emerging in the church there, and some of them were sliding into legalism. And he says, how did you come to know the Lord? Was it not through the hearing of faith?

[17 : 54] It was through hearing that they came to faith, not through obeying the works of the law. That's how he says they received the Spirit of God.

The hearing of faith. In other words, through hearing the gospel and believing it. Jesus said to his disciples, take heed how you hear.

And I would suggest that that is a word for us tonight. How are you hearing? How am I hearing tonight? The word of God is at the very center of our worship.

Are we hearing it? Are we hearing what God is saying to us through it? Notice how the people in Ezra's time gathered before the water gate, how they heard the word of the Lord.

First they heard it in adoration. As soon as Ezra opened the book, they all stood up. And the people said, praise the Lord, the great God.

[19 : 05] The people raised their arms in the air and answered, amen, amen. They knelt in worship with their faces to the ground. Then they arose and stood in their places.

It was then that the Levites explained the law to them. And so for the people to hear the word of God was not simply an encounter with a text.

It was not simply an encounter with a scroll, an encounter with a book. It was an encounter with God himself. God reveals himself through his word.

And God meets with his people as they gather around his word. And there is a sense in which our response ought to be to worship the Lord who speaks to us and to praise him and to bless him and to magnify his name.

I wonder when we come to church, is that our response as the word of God is read, as the word of God is preached? Do we say with the people at our hearts, amen, amen?

[20 : 11] Do we praise God for who he is for speaking to us through his word in mercy and in grace and in love? When we come to church, do we come with the spirit of expectancy, expecting God to speak?

Or do we simply, have we simply agreed in our hearts to settle for the routine? And coming to the house of God is merely duty. Now it is a duty.

But for the people in Ezra's time it was much more than a duty. It was an encounter with the living God. Remember what Paul said to the Corinthians that if a stranger were to come, that stranger should discover that God is among them.

God is among you. And so we need to ask ourselves tonight whether we have a spirit of expectancy for God to meet us in his word.

God is a God who reveals himself, who speaks to us, and who communicates himself to us through his word. But secondly, the people heard, the congregation heard the scriptures with celebration.

[21 : 23] First they wept in verse 9, probably from a mixture of emotion and a sense of personal guilt. But Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites told the crowd, This day is holy to the Lord your God.

You're not to mourn and cry. And they said, It's a day, a time for a feast. And listening to the word of God can be unsettling.

Because God speaks to us as a judge as well as a saviour. And God's word can bring conviction and it often does. But ultimately God's word is a word that brings joy.

God convicts us in order that he might awaken us to our need. God may come to us, as Luther said, first of all as our adversary, in order that we might discover him as our friend.

And ultimately we are invited to rejoice in the presence of God. And that's what Ezra and Nehemiah and the Levites said to the people.

[22 : 35] They said, This is not a funeral. It's a feast. It's a party. It's a time to rejoice and to enjoy God's presence, God's goodness, God's gospel.

But we also notice that the people heard with compassion. Their celebration of the word of God, their response to God speaking to them was humanitarian. It was not hedonistic. It was not, you know, we've had a good feel-good factor.

And therefore, you know, we can rejoice. That was not their response. They were concerned about those who were in need in the community. We see them doing this.

They were encouraged to share their food with others. Nehemiah said, Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks and send some to those who have nothing prepared.

This day is sacred to the Lord. Do not grieve for the joy of the Lord is your strength. And so we read in verse 12 that the people went away to eat and drink and to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

[23 : 57] But they expressed their joy to the Lord by helping those who had nothing, by helping those who were in need.

It wasn't a self-centered, hedonistic, feel-good factor that is at the center of so much enjoyment today, perhaps even in Christian circles.

This was a concern for others and to see others blessed as well as themselves.

And true hearing of the word of God results in caring for those who are less fortunate. God has commanded us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

And our response must first of all be to love God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind. That response is limited unless we also love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

[24 : 57] And so there's a sense in which when we worship together we are members one of another. And we are concerned not only with how I am hearing the word of God but with how my neighbor, my friend is hearing the word of God.

I'm concerned for the person beside me, the person in front of me. So that we are worshipping and responding to the Lord together. Not simply as a series of individuals but as a body, as a network of people.

It's interesting that the hearing on this occasion was also inclusive. It's interesting that in a culture where worship was regarded as being largely a male preserve women and children are also full participants here.

And it's important, I think, to remember that that worship is worship for everybody. It's worship for children as well as for adults.

It's worship for women as well as for men. And it's important for us to remember because we sometimes tend to make worship a very adult experience. But worship is to involve the children as well as the adults.

[26 : 13] Worship is to be inclusive rather than exclusive. And so the people respond. The congregation hears.

God speaks and the congregation hears. But finally, we notice here that the people ask. They asked Ezra, in verse 1, to get the book of the law of Moses.

They asked Ezra to bring out the book of the law of Moses. Now this event did not take place in the temple. It took place in the public square.

And I think that is suggestive in itself because it reminds us that the word of God has a role to play, not simply within the four walls of a church or within a believing community.

It has a role to play outside in the public square of life. And we are to be concerned, I believe, to carry the word of God out into the public square.

[27 : 27] Because we may well discover that people out there are asking and searching, asking questions, searching for answers, which only the word of God can provide.

For various reasons they may not come to church. One of the reasons that so many people today in our age, when there is so much interest in spirituality, do not come to church is that they feel the church is unspiritual.

And we need to take the gospel to them. We need to go, go into all the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Take the word of God out. And we may discover that there are people out there who are asking questions, just as the people were asking questions in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Of course, the church and the temple have a special place in God's purposes. And both are of great importance in God's drama of redemption. Yet it is important, I believe, it is significant that this key event in the biblical story took place outside the walls of the temple.

[28 : 44] God is challenging us, I think, to seek those outside who are asking questions. There are many people today who are asking questions.

The tragedy is to feel that the church does not have the answers. And I don't think they are going to come unless we go to them.

And we share the good news of the gospel with them. And we help them to see that the questions that they are asking about meaning and significance, about transcendence and other things, are answered in the word of God.

And to introduce them to the scriptures and help them to interact and to engage with the scriptures out there, where they are, whether it's in coffee shops or in sports centres or wherever.

We need to carry the gospel to them. That's what the Lord has commanded us to do. There are many people who, in the world of today, in our Western world, who are refugees from modernity.

[29 : 55] They're looking for a spiritual interpretation of life. Now, often, they look in a New Age direction within themselves.

and they look towards, in a pantheistic way, seeking to be in harmony with creation. But they're looking for a spiritual solution to their lives.

And it's an opportunity for us to share the good news of the gospel with them. So we have a unique opportunity today to share the gospel with people who are asking spiritual questions to help them to realise that God does speak through His word.

And that He offers answers to these deep questions of life. And that men and women can find their true significance, their full significance, in submitting to God, believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, and following Him.

So we need to carry the gospel out into the word of God, into the world in which we live. I remember years ago when I was a student in the dim and distant past, our professor of New Testament in the Free Church College telling us, quoting from Vincent Taylor, who at that time was a well-known New Testament scholar in London, I think.

[31 : 31] And someone asked Vincent Taylor once, what is a good theologian? And his answer was another question, can he write a tract? Can he communicate the gospel to someone who is outside the church?

And I'm not suggesting that we water down anything in the gospel. I'm just simply suggesting we take it out and we explain it just as the Levites did on this occasion, outside the water gate.

And this is the task not simply of the professional theologians, it's the task of each one of us who profess to be witnesses of Jesus as God gives us opportunity not to duck below the barricade, but to stand up, be counted, and to testify, to witness to the Lord Jesus Christ and to share his word with others.

That is our task, that is our privilege, and that is the challenge that we face. May God enable us to share the word of God with others and to help others to understand it, to believe it, and to receive it. Amen. Let us pray.