

17 September 2023 Sunday 9.00 am and 10.30 am

THE PEOPLE AND THE BOOK

Sermon preached by The Revd Dr Tony Martin delivered at Cromwell Presbyterian Church



Billy Graham, the famous American evangelist, visited New Zealand in 1959 with the tacit support and assistance of the government. Huge crowds turned up to hear him preach. This is Graham's second meeting at Carlaw Park in Auckland.

Superstar evangelist Dr. Billy Graham electrifies Dunedin in 1969

Carisbrook, 9 March 1969: Under a threatening cloud, twenty thousand spectators brace against the cold wind, wrapped in blankets and travelling rugs. Many have come from beyond Dunedin, by bus from smaller regional centres and still more by train from Invercargill and Christchurch. A group of Canadians and Americans, as well as a party from the North Island arrived by air earlier in the week. Present also is the minister of broadcasting, the Hon. L. R. Adams-Schneider and mayor of Dunedin Mr. J. G. Barnes. At this point, the event might be fairly mistaken for a big rugby match, save for the fact that rugby games never end with over one thousand people, eighty percent aged under

twenty-five, publicly coming forward to accept Christ. This was the first and last Dunedin crusade of American evangelist Dr. Billy Graham.

READINGS:

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

1 All the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel.

2 So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. 3 He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

5 Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. 6 Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, “Amen! Amen!” Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

8 They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

9 Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, “This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep.” For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

10 Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those

who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

Luke 4:14-21

Jesus Rejected at Nazareth

14 Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. 15 He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

16 He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

**18 “The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me**

**to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the
prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's
favour.”**

**20 Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to
the attendant and sat down. The eyes of
everyone in the synagogue were fastened on
him. 21 He began by saying to them, “Today
this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”**

SENTENCE FOR THE DAY

**Jesus read from the prophet of Isaiah: ‘The Spirit of
the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the
poor, to proclaim release to the captives’ Luke 4:18**

INTRODUCTION

How are you all feeling now ... with Spring under way ... and are suitably inspired ... I trust ... from the departure of the long cold days of winter? Revived? Pawing the ground like a bull ... ready to take on anything and everything ... that Spring and Summer will throw at you? Chin to the wind ... shoulder to the wheel ... steadfast and sure?

Now, you may imagine from some my sermons and conversations ... that I believe the greatest need of today is spiritual renewal.

Both individual Christians, whole churches, and indeed our community, and nation ... need to hear the message of Jesus: to repent ... which means aligning our life with God's will ... and to be filled continuously with the Holy Spirit.

It is ... of course ... absolutely true that there are very many positive things that bring joy and hope to us on a daily basis. But in the background, one senses that all is not well in the wider church, our community and nation.

We need more than anything else ... spiritual renewal. And from this well-spring of change, will flow greater renewal, healing, and hope.

Frankly, this was the message of John the Baptist ... the forerunner to Christ. And it has been the same message of the church through its long and varied history.

The French author Victor Hugo said over a century ago, **“England has two books, the Bible and Shakespeare. England made Shakespeare but the Bible made England.”**

Supporting that view, historians tell us that Elizabethan England was indeed a country of one book, and that book was the Bible.

When they arrived in America, the Pilgrim Fathers brought with them that same reverence for the Bible.

“The Bible came with them,” said American statesman Daniel Webster, **“and it is not to be doubted ... that to the free and universal reading of the Bible ... is to be ascribed [our] views of civil liberties.”**

President Woodrow Wilson said, **“America was born to exemplify ... righteousness which is derived from the revelations of Holy Scripture.”**

I wonder what you make of all of that?

Now, whether the Bible is “making” any nation today may be debated, but one thing is sure: The Scriptures helped to “make” the nation of Old Testament Israel.

They were a “people of the Book” as no other nation has been, and we ... today ... would do well to follow ancient Israel’s example.

I have no doubt that when we get away from loving, reading, and obeying the Word of God ... revealed in scripture, that we lose the blessing of God.

Here is an interesting scripture to ponder on ... saying ... that if we want to be like fruitful trees ... we must delight in God's Word (Ps. 1:1–3).

**“Blessed is the one
who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,
² but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,
and who meditates on his law day and
night.
³ That person is like a tree planted by
streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers.”**

This explains why Nehemiah called for a “Bible conference or national convocation” ... and invited Ezra ... the scribe ... to be the teacher.

You see the walls of Jerusalem ... which needed to be rebuilt after returning home from the Exile in Babylon ... were now finished ... and the gates were hung.

So, the material needs of the city had been met; now was the time to focus on the spiritual needs of the people in the city.

And chapters 8–13 of Nehemiah record that spiritual ministry:

- instructing the people (chap. 8),
- confessing sin (chap. 9),
- dedicating the walls (chaps 10–12), and
- cleansing the fellowship (chap. 13)

It is important to note that Ezra and Nehemiah put scripture ... first ... in the life of the city.

What happened in Jerusalem from that point on was ... a by-product ... of the people's response to the Scriptures.

“The primary task of the church and of the Christian minister is the preaching of the Word of God,” said D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

“The decadent periods and eras ... in the history of the church ... have always been those periods when preaching had declined”¹

The Holy Spirit you see uses the Bible to ... cleanse and ... revive ... the hearts of the people of God.

Now, it is a self-evident truth that if God is to work in and through his people, then they must respond positively to scripture; and this chapter ... chapter

¹ Preaching and Preachers, pp. 19, 24.

8 of Nehemiah ... describes three basic responses:

- understanding the Word (8:1–8),
- rejoicing in the Word (vv. 9–12),
- and obeying the Word (vv. 13–18) – which we will not cover today.

So, you will notice the whole person

- mind (understanding),
- heart (rejoicing), and
- will (obeying)
- must be inspired and influenced by God’s revelation in the scriptures

FIRSTLY, WE MUST UNDERSTAND THE WORD OF GOD (NEH. 8:1–8)

Now, I am sure you accept the Bible is not a “magic book” ... that changes people or circumstances ... because somebody reads it or recites it.

To be honest, I have found the Bible must be understood ... before it can enter the heart ... and release its life-changing power.

Note that six times in this chapter you can find “understanding” mentioned (vv. 2–3, 7–8, 12–13).

I found it interesting that ... only those people who were old enough to understand the Scripture ... were permitted to be in the assembly or convocation (v. 3), which underlines this point.

And, in Jesus’ “Parable of the Sower” (Matt. 13:1–9, 18–23), the emphasis is on understanding the Word of God.

Jesus compared understanding and receiving the Word ... to the planting of seed in the soil ... where it takes root and bears fruit.

Now, Ezra was the ideal person to conduct this outdoor Bible national convocation.

He was a priest and scribe who

“had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel” (Ezra 7:10).

It is important to realise he had returned to Jerusalem ... about fourteen years before Nehemiah ... and tried to bring the people back to the ways of the Lord (Ezra 7–10).

So, notice the flow of events that Ezra performed for the people during that special event.

Firstly, notice the timing: on the first day of the seventh month, which was the Jewish equivalent of our New Year's Day.

You see ... the seventh month ... was a special time in the Jewish calendar ... because the Jews celebrated the:

- a. Feast of Trumpets on the first day, the
- b. Day of Atonement on the tenth day, and the
- c. Feast of Tabernacles from the fifteenth day to the twenty-first day (Lev. 23:23–44).

So, it was the perfect time for the nation to get right with the Lord ... and make a fresh new beginning.

Secondly, please notice the name of the book that Ezra brought: it was “the Book of the Law.”

Now, this was probably the entire scroll of the Torah, the five Books of Moses, the very foundation of the Jewish religion and civil law.

OK, it isn't likely that Ezra read and explained all five Books of Moses in that short period of time.

But perhaps he concentrated on explaining Deuteronomy ... and referred to the other books as he had need.

Thirdly, notice Ezra stood on a wooden platform (“pulpit”) above the people elevating the authority of the Word ... and so they could see ... and hear him better.

He faced the public square where the people stood, with the gate behind him ... which may have served as a sounding board ... to help project his voice to the vast assembly.

Fourthly, notice that when he opened the Book the people stood up.

We notice that when Ezra lifted the scroll ... and unrolled it to the passage he would read ... the people who were seated in the square ... honoured the scripture by standing up.

Why did they do this? Well, they knew they would not be hearing a ... mere man ... speak his own ideas ... they would be hearing the Word of God ... revealed in scripture (1 Thess. 2:13).

And, extraordinarily, the people remained standing while the Law was read ... and explained.

We also notice that Ezra started his reading and teaching early in the morning ... and continued

through midday (v. 3) ... which means the nation stood and listened for five or six hours ... and this continued for a week.

No doubt ... from time to time ... he gave the people opportunities to rest.

But the people were there to hear God speak ... and were willing to stand ... and to listen.

Fifthly, After he opened the scriptures, he blessed God

And in many churches, there is a blessing after the reading of Scripture.

I note with interest ... in the Anglican tradition ... the congregation responds to the reading of the Gospel ... by standing ... and after the reading ... the priest says “This is the Gospel of Christ” ... and the people respond by saying ... “Praise to Christ the Word”.

That is an interesting liturgical flourish from a different tradition from our own here.

I recall from years past ... in the Presbyterian Church ... and indeed the Church of Scotland ...that the worship service always commenced with the congregation standing ... the Session Clerk carrying the Bible down the aisle of the church ... followed by the minister.

The Bible was placed on the lectern ... the Session Clerk tipped his head and acknowledged the minister ... who would then read a short passage from the Scripture ... as a call to worship ... and announce the opening hymn of praise ... to Almighty God.

In Ezra's time ... the people affirmed his words by saying ... "Amen, Amen" ... which means "So be it!"

It was a united congregation that honoured the Scriptures ... and was willing to devote half of their day to hearing it read ... and taught.

You know, they didn't worship the Book ... they worshiped the Lord ... who spoke to them from the Book.

Well, I want to commend you ... as Presbyterians here in Cromwell ... for showing a love and respect for the Scriptures.

And we are, in fact, commanded to **“give attention to the public reading of Scripture”** says 1 Tim. 4:13.

And yet, sadly, in many churches today, often the only Scripture read publicly ... is the text of the sermon.

OK, you might be interested to know that in some parts of the world ... especially in Eastern Europe ... before the collapse of the Communist bloc ... believers would stand for hours ... in crowded churches ... to hear expositional preaching based on scripture.

Sadly, perhaps in the average Western church, the shorter the sermon, the better we like it. The first mark of a good sermon ... many feel today ... is a short sermon. And please do not ask me to think too much or to take God too seriously.

Hmmm

You know ... I have thought that I should encourage you ... to consider bringing a thermos flask ... and a sandwich ... when listening to sermons here in Cromwell. May be we need time ... and perhaps refreshments along the way.

A sermon, in my opinion, should be a pivotal point in our lives for the coming week.

It should provoke discussion, reflection, and change.

Now, this is not saying all sermons will be earth shattering ... nor all preachers will be correct ... in their understanding ... and application of scripture.

I am not that naïve ... or arrogant.

Nevertheless, preaching the Word of God ... in my opinion ... is the highest ... and most holy calling ... of all vocations.

So, in our reading this morning ... we notice that Ezra read ... and explained the Book.

This was because the common people didn't own copies of the Scriptures, so they were thrilled to hear the Word of God ... contained in the scripture.

And the preaching ... means that the Law was explained to the people ... in a language they could understand.

You see, the scripture ... was translated ... and expounded ... in such a way ... that people were able to ... apply it ... to their own lives.

And it is interesting to note, the Levites assisted Ezra in teaching the Law ... for this was one of their God-given ministries (Deut. 33:10; Mal. 2:7).

You know ... they probably mingled with the people and ... when there was a break in the reading ... they may have answered questions ... and told them how to apply the Law ... to their own lives.

So, here we have a balance between the public proclamation of scripture in a large assembly ... a convocation if you like ...and the personal application in a smaller group.

Both are important, don't you think.

SECONDLY, WE MUST REJOICE IN THE WORD

You see, as Ezra read and explained scripture ... the assembly's first response was one of ... conviction and grief.

They mourned over their sins.

Now, you see the Jews had just observed the annual Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, where the Lord had dealt with their sins (Lev. 16) ... so they should have been rejoicing in the Lord's forgiveness.

In the Jewish calendar, the Feast of Tabernacles – which is a happy time - follows the Day of Atonement, giving God's people ... an entire week of happy celebration (23:26–44).

The sequence is important: first conviction, then cleansing, and then celebration.

The Word of God brings conviction ... and leads to repentance – which is the aligning of our lives with the will and purpose of God - but it also brings us joy.

... for the same Word that wounds ... also heals.

“Your words were found, and I ate them, and Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart; for I am called by Your name” (Jer. 15:16,).

“The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart” (Ps. 19:8).

“Your testimonies I have taken as a heritage forever, for they are the rejoicing of my heart” (Ps 119:111).

So, assisted by the Levites, Nehemiah the governor ... and Ezra the priest and teacher of the

law ... convinced the people to stop mourning ... and start celebrating. Halleluiah!

You see, spiritually we learn that ... it is as wrong to mourn ... when God has forgiven us ... as it is to rejoice ... when sin has conquered us. (repeat)

We should not be sad when we are forgiven. And we should not be rejoicing when we are living in sin.

I believe it is spiritually true to say ... that when we are unrepentant we have no reason for rejoicing ...

but when we are forgiven, we have no reason for mourning (Matt. 9:9–17).

Yes, as God's children we carry burdens ... and know ... what it is to weep (Neh. 2:1–2)

But we also experience power ... that transforms sorrow into joy.

It isn't enough for us to read the scriptures ... or receive the scriptures ... as others expound it ... we must also rejoice in the word of God.

“I rejoice at Your word as one who finds great treasure” (Ps. 119:162).

We read that in Bible days ... and indeed throughout history ... people sometimes hid their wealth in jars ... buried in the ground (Matt. 13:44; Jer. 41:8).

And if a farmer ... ploughing his field ... suddenly discovered a jar filled with gold ... he would certainly rejoice.

Similarly, as you know, there are great treasures buried in the scripture, and we must diligently “dig” for them ... as we read ... meditate ... and pray.

And when we find these treasures ... highlighted for us by the Holy Spirit ... we rejoice and give thanks.

“Blessed is the person who fears the LORD, who finds great delight in his commands” (Ps. 112:1).

So, to conclude ...

We will discover ... as the Israelites discovered in Nehemiah’s and Ezra’s time ... that if we delight in the scripture ... God will delight in us ... and he will share his blessings with us.

AMEN