

## **Hearing the word**

*Wilson Poon, St. Peter's, Luton Place, Edinburgh, 15<sup>th</sup> November 2009 (Bible Sunday)*

Text: Nehemiah 8:1-12, 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28, Luke 4:16-30

Thank you Lord for your Word to us. Please teach us to listen. Amen

Paul had no intention of going to the European province of Macedonia. He was on a mission to Asia Minor. But he had a vision; you can read about it in Acts 16. This vision brought him into Europe together with Silas and Timothy. After a short stay at Philippi, the three arrived at Thessalonica, the administrative capital of Macedonia. Paul's intention would have been to stay in this city for some time, and use it as a base to spread the Gospel throughout the province.

Paul's European mission got off to a good start. The ruler of the local synagogue, Jason, and a number of upper-class Greek ladies became believers. Then disaster struck. Some local Jews persuaded the magistrate that Paul was a trouble maker. Jason was made to guarantee Paul's good conduct – a euphemism for making sure that Paul left the city quickly with as little fuss as possible. So Paul was spirited out of Thessalonica in the dead of night. In the next city, Beroea, the same drama was repeated when the agitators from Thessalonica caught up with Paul. He was again spirited out of town, this time leaving Macedonia all together. After a short stay in Athens, Paul arrived at Corinth for a long stay.

Once Paul was settled in Corinth, he started to worry about the Thessalonian congregation, who undoubtedly would be facing persecution. Would they be able to stand firm? He wanted to go back to see them – but couldn't. We don't quite know why. Instead, Paul sent Timothy and Silas. These two came back with good news – the nascent church at Thessalonica was thriving. Relieved, Paul sat down with his two companions to write a letter to his Thessalonian friends. The date was 50 A.D., give or take a year or two. The resulting letter is preserved, and became the earliest document in our New Testament.

Why am I telling you this on Bible Sunday? Because it helps us understanding what the New Testament is *for*. You see, the most ancient document of our New Testament is a letter written to a congregation by their apostle *in lieu of a personal visit*. We get a strong sense of this from what Paul said at the very end of this letter:

‘I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all the brothers and sisters’ (5:26).

Paul gave specific instruction for his letter be read, that is to say, read aloud, to the whole congregation. In other words, the oldest part of the New Testament was a document meant for *public reading*. And the purpose of such public reading is clear. As the congregation listened, it would be as if Paul was speaking to them, even though he could not visit in person. In other words, Paul *addressed* the congregation through the public reading of his letter, and such reading conveyed his *presence* to them in lieu of a personal visit. The key words there are ‘address’ and ‘presence’. I will keep returning to these.

After 1 Thessalonians, Paul wrote many more letters. All of them were meant for the same purpose – for public reading. Through such public reading, Paul was able to address congregations he could not visit. It is easy to see how such reading of Paul’s letters soon took its place alongside the reading of Old Testament scriptures as part of early Christian worship. When the Gospels came to be written, their public reading held an important place, too. The Gospels were memories of Jesus by the apostles or their close friends. When these Gospels were read out to congregations, they could hear these apostolic witnesses addressing them, giving them authoritative recollections of Jesus their Lord.

So, *all* the documents of the New Testament were written originally for *public reading*. Such reading brought apostolic presence to first-century congregations. Through such reading, these early believers heard the apostles addressing them, with teaching, with encouragement, sometimes with rebuke, and with recollections of Jesus. And congregations were meant to *respond* to such apostolic address: sort out your quarrels, encourage people to work hard, don’t listen to those who deny the humanity of Christ, etc. etc.

Very soon, the early church realised that it was more than the apostles addressing them when they heard their writings read out in public worship. They realised that it was *God* addressing them. In other words, apostolic writings like Paul’s letters and the Gospels became *Scripture*. When the early church read aloud such writings, they heard God addressing them.

Needless to say, when God’s people are being addressed by their God, a response is expected. We saw this dramatically in our reading from Nehemiah. When Ezra read the Law to the people, they realised that God was summoning them back to obedience. On this occasion, they rose to the challenge magnificently – you can read about their response in subsequent chapters in the book of Nehemiah. Five centuries later, when Jesus read out the passage from Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth, the occasion was no less dramatic. God was summoning the people, through the person of the Messiah, to participate in a new era of liberation. This time, they rejected what they heard.

Here, then, are two stories of the people of God *listening* to the word of God being read out and responding to what they’ve heard. I have a feeling that ‘listening’ is something that we are becoming very bad at doing. If you don’t believe me, ask yourself this question: when those passages from Nehemiah, 1 Thessalonians and Luke were being read out to us just now, what were you doing? It seems to be a peculiar question, and the answer is even more peculiar. More than 90% of us had our eyes to the pews paper, and were reading the words on the page. In other words, most of us were not actually paying full attention to the *reading*. We apparently don’t like to ‘just listen’.

How different it was in Ezra’s days. Let us look at one detail in that passage in Nehemiah 8. We are told that when Ezra was reading out loud to the congregation, ‘the ears of the people were attentive to the book of the law.’ The Hebrew original was even more direct. It does not have the words ‘were attentive’. It simply says, ‘The ears of the people to the book of the law.’ They were ‘all ears’ to the reading, if you like. They listened collectively as the people of God, and they responded collectively as the people of God.

Of course, they had no option. There was one scroll, and Ezra was reading from it. And they did not have a projector! We, on the other hand, have the option of following the printed page. And most of us took that option. I understand that for some of us, this is almost a necessity, since we cannot hear very well. But I don't think that accounts for why 90% of us had eyes to the written text. 'Does it matter?' I hear you ask. I think it does. To understand why, let us think through with me some of the differences between reading a printed text and listening to it being read aloud.

To start with, reading from a printed text is essentially a *private* activity. There is me, and there is the text in front of me. No one else needs to be involved. Listening to a text being read out in a congregation, however, is a *public* and *corporate* activity – we listen *together*. Such togetherness is of the very essence of worship. We come *together* as the people of God to worship God.

But there is more. When I read a printed text, the control lies with me. I decide how fast to read. If my attention lapses, I can turn back and re-read what I've missed. I can stop at any time, and so on. I have all the knobs. I control the text. But when I listen to someone else reading a text out loud, the power relationship is totally inverted. The *other* person has the control. So I have to give the other person the courtesy of paying attention. I no longer control the text. Instead, the text, through the reader, *addresses me*. And when we, filled with the Spirit, hear this address, we realise that is *God* addressing us. That is why we have the antiphonal response at the end of our readings:

This is the word of the Lord.  
Thanks be to God.

The 'this' there refers to what we have just *heard*, not what our eyes have seen on the printed page. We are affirming that *that reading* has indeed been God addressing us.

If that is the case, then an interesting question arises. If we really believe that the voice from the loud speaker is the very voice of God speaking to us, would we be looking at a piece of paper? No, I don't think so. We would listen with full attention, wouldn't we? 'But it wasn't actually God speaking to us,' I hear you say. 'It was only Dan and Betty and Fred at the microphone. We know them; they can't fool us into thinking that they are God!' Ah, we've heard that one before, haven't we? What did they say to Jesus at Nazareth? 'Is this not Joseph's son?' And 'they drove him out of the town ...' (Luke 4:22, 29)

No, we mustn't say, 'It's only Dan and Betty and Fred.' God has chosen ordinary people such as Dan and Betty and Fred, as ordinary as you and me, to address us, God's own people, just as God has chosen plain, ordinary bread and wine to nourish us later on at the communion rail. That has implications for how we understand the ministry of readers, but that is for another occasion. Today, I want concentrate on those of us who are being addressed by the reading. My point is that it really was *God* addressing us when Dan and Betty and Fred read to us. We owe it to God to pay attention. And the way to pay attention when we are being addressed is to listen – 'all ears', as Nehemiah 8 suggests.

And as we the congregation give ear to the reading of Scripture as God's address to God's people, we actually *become* the church in the process. In abstract theological language, the activity of listening to the reading of God's word together *constitutes* the church. If we choose to give ear to the readings as God addressing us, then God's presence is indeed with us and makes us into one people. It is as simple as that, but as profound as that.

Let me therefore invite you to participate in this activity now as a conclusion to this sermon – let's practise giving ear, not eye, but ear, to the Bible, and respond appropriately at the end ...

[READ OUT 1 Thess. 5:12-24]

*This* is the word of the Lord.  
Thanks be to God.