

Reading The Bible In Community - 26th September 2021

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- [0 : 00] Good morning everyone, it's so nice to be with you today. It sounds like it might have been a bit of a stressful week for some of you, so I hope this is useful, or at least not unhelpful.
- So I'm going to talk about the Bible today. Now the Bible is a really massive book, or loads of books, and sometimes of it is really quite dense. It can be quite difficult to get into, so if you're listening to this thinking, I don't really pick up the Bible or I struggle with that, that is totally fine.
- I think everyone in this room has struggled with the Bible at some point, especially some of the lists. I really struggle with the lists. And we're going to start by looking at one section of the Bible, which is about the Jews just after they've been in exile.
- So I don't really know what your background is, but as you probably know and can see from today, the Jews have been persecuted for thousands and thousands of years. They still are now.
- And this time, slightly more than 500 years before Jesus was born, they'd been conquered by the Babylonian Empire and forced to leave their homeland, and they'd been exiled in Babylon for about 50 years.
- [1 : 10] So we think it's bad not attending church for two years-ish. Imagine 50. Those are people who were born without being able to attend temple. Some people died without being able to return to the temple.
- And the temple had been destroyed, so I guess they thought they probably were never going back. Two and a half generations who couldn't worship in the way that they were used to, or do any of the normal things involved in worshipping God for them as a community.
- And I guess in exile, this meant the Israelites needed to find new ways of worshipping. Mostly it seems that this was small groups or synagogues, which is again a bit like us, being forced online into our house groups, being forced to worship with YouTube on our own, in our families, if we're lucky enough to live with them.
- The Israelites were forced to pray and developed kind of house synagogue worship to cope with the fact that they couldn't make it to the temple. Now, the section we're looking at today is when they've just got back.
- So they've been allowed to return by this guy called Cyrus, who they're a big fan of. And it's from the book of Nehemiah. And we have the Jews returning to Jerusalem. And almost as soon as they settle in, they are so excited about worshipping together that they gather in a square by the temple, and they ask a guy called Ezra to come and open the book of the law.
- [2 : 29] So, just before we kick on, who is Ezra? Now, Ezra, his dad was a priest. That kind of makes him a priest in Jewish society. He probably didn't have any of the normal training, because they'd been in exile, and it was kind of illegal to worship in all the ways they used to.

And he's a scribe. So he's been involved in copying out some of the scripture over the years. And which is the book of the law that they wanted him to read? Well, again, we don't completely know, but we think it's probably the first five books of the Bible.

So Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Now, many people think it's because of Ezra and the line of priests that we have these books in the form we have them today.

They kept them alive, even though it wasn't legal to have those books in Babylon. And for the Jews, these books were the most valuable way of understanding who they were, that God had chosen them.

So they really prioritised keeping these words, these five books alive. And Ezra, who was a bit of a mixed bag, as we'll come to later, really believed that the most important thing for the survival of the Jewish people was that the people should be the purest Jews they could possibly be.

[3 : 43] Now, I think we're quite lucky to be post-Jesus, so we know that pure isn't always the same as loving, as I'll suggest in a minute, and I think Jesus suggests in the New Testament. Now, there's some debate, but it's generally reckoned that Ezra was the guy who pulled together all of the stories we have in those five books and put them together as books.

And Ezra obviously tried to do this with integrity and prayer, but he's just one guy trying to pull a lot of information together. And Ezra tried to make these into books that we can follow.

But because people have been telling these stories for hundreds and hundreds of years, he couldn't just smooth it over and change the stories. So he leaves all those niggling details that we still struggle today with.

And that means there are some little contradictions. But Ezra makes the decision not to try and cut it or to make it smooth or to make it perfect, because he doesn't want to get it wrong. He thinks there's some really important words in there.

And so he wants them all to be there. And that's why we get the two stories of creation in Genesis, or the two different Noah's Ark stories. He leaves in the sections that comment on each other and repeat each other.

[4 : 55] So that's who Ezra was, and that's what they're getting him to read. So back in Jerusalem, we have this huge community listening to Ezra. And it's quite an unusual community, because we see in the Bible that it included both men and women.

Anyone who could understand what Ezra was talking about was welcomed. And it took place in the first day of the seventh month. Facing the people in the square by the water gate, Ezra began to read out parts of the first five books of the Bible.

And his sermon was a bit longer than mine, because the book is so long. He talked for at least six or seven hours. I promise I won't do that. From daybreak to noon, so they got up at dawn to hear him.

Everyone who heard him there, men, women, children with the ability to understand. And as he read, they were focused and listened carefully to the book of the law, because they'd been away from Jerusalem for so long, and the temple had been destroyed.

So they'd lost their way of worshipping God, which had been impossible in exile, which is the normal services and sacrifices that they were used to. And after 50 plus years in foreign lands, we kind of hope that most people remembered the major laws, like do not kill other people.

[6 : 08] But the details of the festivals, the Sabbath, those things would have been forgotten. So Ezra opens the scriptures and reads to the people, where he tries to remind the Jews of all the details of how to live in God's ways and serve him.

Now there are lots of different ways of reading the Bible. And I guess Ezra's reading was kind of a bit like a political rally, so the extreme left picture. He's kind of, it's a bit like a conference speech, I guess it's conference season at the moment.

So he was reading to a huge crowd, explaining as he goes, translating as he goes. But for us, when we read the Bible, it's often quite individual. So we end up reading with our own personal copies or on our phone.

Churches and small groups are great, and sometimes even listening to a talk online. That's kind of very personal, very individual. And yet, reading the Bible together, listening to the Bible together, is one of the best ways it's possible to read the Bible.

That's how the Bible was traditionally read, how it's designed to be read. If you think about it, only in the last couple of hundred years has it even been possible to have your own copy of the Bible. Books are a really recent invention when you think about it.

[7 : 20] But not only given our recent inventions, but in ancient times, when it came to the ancient Hebrew scriptures, like the ones Ezra were reading, they were written in a way it was almost impossible to read. So they didn't have any punctuation at all, no vowels, and no spaces between words.

So can you imagine picking up a book with no spaces between words? You would need a lot of training. You basically need to know it off by heart to read it at all. And they were also written in Hebrew, which wasn't the language most people spoke.

It's like reading in Latin for us, I guess, because most people spoke Aramaic. So they needed someone to translate like Ezra. People weren't reading the scripture alone at home. They were reading it together. And I'd say ideally, they were interpreting it together.

But in the case of Ezra, I don't think he was allowing people to interpret scripture together. He was someone who was very devoted to understanding and interpreting the scriptures.

But it's a very top-down approach. He speaks and everyone listens. He doesn't leave any space for discussion. It's a monologue. But worse than that, I'd say Ezra was kind of involved in a bit of a power grab in this newly returned community.

[8 : 31] A power grab for himself and other priests, which I guess you might say is a little bit typical. For example, he offers some really cruel choices, which I want to say don't come from God.

So when they came back to Israel, Ezra said, And I require you to divorce anyone who's not Jewish who you're married to. Abandon your wives and any mixed-race children you have.

And leave them to die, because the important thing is that we're really pure Jews. And I want to say that's not from God. I think that kind of, all of those women and children would have become enslaved and died.

And I don't think that's okay. I have this picture of God in heaven with a big sign saying, please, please don't kill any kids. And I think that's the God we see in Jesus. Now Ezra's coming from this place of trauma and fear.

The whole Jewish people are. They've been in exile for a really, really long time. And it's a really common response to trauma and traumatic situations to form little cliques, to focus on who's in and who's out.

[9 : 39] And I guess we've seen that a bit in the pandemic when we think about some of the conspiracy theories we've heard about the vaccine, for example, who's in and who's out. I think that can be something we think about quite a lot when we're in trauma.

But this is what Ezra thought the Bible was telling him to do. He thought abandoning all those mixed-race children to die was what God wanted. And using rules in the Bible to exclude people like Ezra did is, in my view, as far removed from the ways of God seen in Jesus as it's possible to be.

So I guess that's not such a good way to read the Bible. But I'm going to suggest that there is a really hopeful way of reading the Bible. I think the best way you can possibly read the Bible is to read it in community and read it so that everyone can share their take on it.

And I think that sometimes also means being encouraged to wrestle a bit with what you read. I think the Bible is really important. People are really desperately trying to explain something that is almost impossible to put into words, and that is God.

And sometimes they get it right. And sometimes, like Ezra, people interpret events and situations in a way which don't reflect the God we see revealed in Jesus. Like Ezra's ethnic cleansing.

[10 : 58] Yes, it's in the Bible, but we know it's not right. Which means we're allowed to, even obliged to wrestle with why Ezra thought this kind of barbaric activity could possibly be godly.

Indeed, wrestling is an important part of what it means to be Christian. To wrestle with God. There's an expectation that our relationship with God is not spoon-fed, but worked through, because that's what Israel means.

The people who wrestled with God. So I'm going to give you an example of a story I found it quite helpful to wrestle with, which is the story of Abraham and Isaac. You may remember this story, or you may not.

It's basically the story where Abraham believed that he'd heard God tell him to kill Isaac. He doesn't seem to have argued with this, or at least we don't see him argue with this, even though Abraham is someone who stands up to God, and has argued to save other people.

So Abraham hears from God, asking him to kill his son, and just takes this at face value, or at least that's all we see in the text. And he takes Isaac to the top of a mountain and ties Isaac up, and stands over his son with a knife prepared to kill him.

[12 : 07] And at the very last minute, God speaks and tells him not to kill his son, and that he sent a ram in Isaac's place. This isn't even the first child that Abraham has left to die.

He has another son he left to die before, which is Ishmael, who he abandoned in a desert with his mother. We also don't have any record of Abraham standing up for Ishmael.

In fact, in the Bible, it says that he stayed silent. Now, until recently, I had read the story of Abraham almost sacrificing his son Isaac as a really strange test from God, something which demonstrates Abraham's commitment to God, and I assumed they probably made up afterwards.

If I read it, I probably read it from Abraham's perspective, and I asked myself, would I kill someone that dear to me? However, I was reading this scripture with a female rabbi friend, and she pointed out a couple of things I missed.

So firstly, it could all have been this horrifying mistake. It turns out that the word for sacrifice is also the same word in Hebrew as to lift up or promote. So what if Abraham just got it slightly wrong?

[13 : 12] Can you imagine? Secondly, even if sacrifice is the right understanding, what if Abraham doesn't give the answer God wants? What if God wants Abraham to turn around and say, you're a loving God, you wouldn't ask that?

Then, having decided to sacrifice Isaac, even if there is a last minute reprieve, the rabbi I pointed out, I was reading it with, pointed out that Isaac doesn't go home with Abraham afterwards.

The story very explicitly says that Abraham comes down the hill with the two hired hands. It seems that Isaac, perhaps understandably, after being helping a knife held over his head, didn't want to go home with Abraham.

Interestingly, if you follow Isaac, he actually goes to a place called Bilal Roy, which is a well in the desert, which is where we last saw Ishmael abandoned in the desert. So arguably, Isaac decides that the best thing to do is to go and reconcile with his half-brother Ishmael, who Abraham previously left to die, and make up there.

We're not told in the Bible if after this botched sacrifice, Isaac ever sees his dad, Abraham, again. And if he didn't, who would blame him? The next time we read about Isaac is after his father has died.

[14 : 27] We don't see him present at his mother's funeral. We don't see him even there when they are arranging a bride for him. He seems suspiciously absent in both cases. But after Abraham has died, Ishmael and Isaac come and bury Abraham together.

And I guess that's a chance for closure after a very difficult parenting experience. Now reading the story in this way, the rabbi I was with told me that she found it to be really powerful to identify with Isaac and imagine Isaac not going home with his dad because it gave her permission to walk away from her own abusive family.

And made her feel like there was a biblical precedent for that. And that for me is a really powerful way to engage with scripture. To see ourselves in the stories, question exactly what's going on.

And I think that allows you to find God more powerfully than ever before. Seeing Abraham as a pretty terrible parent and Isaac's seeming willingness to walk away from that abusive relationship gave my rabbi friend permission to walk away from her own abusive relationships.

And that's one way in which the Bible can be so helpful for us. Reading the Bible from Isaac's perspective, which isn't easy, Isaac doesn't say a lot, helps it not to see as a strange story of God testing Abraham.

[15 : 50] But as a tale of hopeful reconciliation and love, I think a bit like the love we see in Jesus. Isaac looks at the way that Abraham has behaved and says, the only way to get past this kind of hurt and trauma is to reach out to other people who are hurting.

In this case, his brother Ishmael. And prove that love is stronger than anything else. Now, since I've been here in Burntwood, I've been lucky enough to be alternating with Linda Hood and going into the Pathway Project.

The bit I'm going into is just a women's refuge for domestic violence. And there are a lot of women there who feel deeply ashamed about leaving their husbands. They feel that God would judge them for that.

And I think having Isaac as a model of someone who might have walked away from his own abusive relationships is a really helpful model to offer those women so they don't blame themselves as much. When I read this passage since coming to this community, I'm reminded of Kathy Coe and the amazing work she's done in response to her own experiences of abuse, where she responded by creating the Pathway Project, which is a refuge and a charity which helps other women and men walk away from abuse.

That's a woman using Isaac as a model in the aftermath of his abuse, reaching out with love to other people. Isaac's story, shows us how we're raised, the relationships we have can be detrimental, but it doesn't ever prevent us from having a right relationship with God, from raising children better, from having better relationships ourselves.

[17 : 23] And in so many ways, okay, he gets some of it wrong, Isaac lives on to be an amazing peacemaker. Now, I wouldn't have got all of this from the Abraham and Isaac story. It was only possible because I was reading it with my female rabbi friend, who opened my eyes to read it in a new way in light of their experiences and reading themselves into the text.

So, I guess, what about the rest of the Bible? Are there any other Bible stories we could explore like this? Any other experiences which offer new lights on the Bible?

I think, in my time in Bristol, the last church I belonged to was a black minority church and I had a midweek Bible study with a group of black nurses and their perspectives as black women in caring professions changed the way that certain stories like the Good Samaritan or the Women at the Well were understood because they brought their experiences to the table and read themselves into the text in a way that I perhaps couldn't.

No, I definitely couldn't. Who am I kidding? And they also knew the Bible even better than I did. Much, much better. I wonder what a difference it would make to our understanding of the Bible and of God if we were to think about other stories from perspectives other than our own.

So, I think one example that comes to mind is the woman caught in adultery. Now, under Jewish law, you can't be caught in adultery unless you're caught in the act. So, where is the man?

[18 : 50] And what does it look like to read from the man's perspective because he was caught too? Why is he not there being stoned to death? Can you imagine how guilty he would feel? We often read it from the stoner's perspective and think, would we throw the first stone?

But how would it feel to imagine ourselves as the woman in that story? What does it actually feel like when Jesus turns to us and says, sin no more? Or, Jesus heals ten lepers and nine don't come back to say thank you and we often look at those nine and think, aren't they ungrateful?

But they've probably been segregated from their wives and their children for years. Can we really blame them for rushing home to give their kids a hug? Would Jesus really blame them for rushing home to give their kids a hug?

What does their healed life look like? What's the rest of the world got for them? And I think sometimes it really helps when we're reading the Bible not to see ourselves as the heroes of the stories. I think they're often very complicated, mixed characters.

but in the supporting cast and imagining all of their lives, I find that helpful anyway. So, what about for us going forward?

[19 : 58] I think we should take permission to wrestle with the Bible. That's what Israel means. I don't think that means that you're looking at it and not treating it as an important text in the eyes of God or anyone else.

But I think that God doesn't expect you to lose your thoughts and your mind. God expects all of you to come to the table. I think the Bible is best read in community.

And by that, I mean listening to and absorbing voices and experiences which aren't the same as ours, but give a fresh perspective on stories and can bring out deeper, truer meanings.

And I think particularly that means sometimes listening to the kind of people who don't really like to talk in Bible study. Often I find the people who don't want to say anything have the best things to say.

And for us as a newly regathered church, we heard some really great testimonies last week. I think that helps open the scripture too, listening to how God is moving in the world today.

[20 : 58] And as we go forward, I think we do well to prioritise listening to each other as a way to shape our own faith and understanding. Amen.