

Understanding The Word Of God

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 February 1980

Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] I want you to turn to the Gospel for today, which is Luke 18, and it's under the Sunday called Quinquagesima, and it's an interesting story.

The interesting part about it is that Christ begins with the pronouncement of all the things that are going to happen. He says their destination is Jerusalem, that the agenda for their visit to Jerusalem was that which was laid down by the prophets in the scriptures of the Old Testament, so that what was going to happen when he got there was simply this.

He will be delivered to the Gentiles, that means the Roman soldiers. He will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon, and they will scourge him and kill him.

And then it goes on to say that on the third day he will rise. Now, the most interesting part of that for me is that it's, I hope, totally familiar to all of you.

Nothing about that could come as words on your ears which were strange and which you would wonder at. So many times have you repeated that in the creed, so much has it been a part of the message of the Christian church through the whole of your lives.

[1 : 51] So the strange part to me is what follows that. Verse 34. They understood none of these things.

This saying was hid from them. They did not grasp what was said. It's reiterated three times in a row.

They didn't understand it. Even if they wanted to understand it, it was hidden from them. And even if it wasn't hidden from them, they didn't have the ability to take hold of it and grasp what was being said.

Now, I count that as a particularly delightful verse in Scripture. Delightful because I think it so perfectly describes what happens in church so often.

That the word of God is clearly set before us in what the choir sings. I trust in what the lessons and commandments teach us.

[3 : 03] And I trust in what the sermon says. And not only is it enunciated in words that you couldn't help but understand, but also your response is taught to you so that you know how to respond.

You know when to stand and when to kneel and when to sit and when to listen and when to walk and when to reply. Everything is there. But could it ever be said of us that we could sit through the whole of a church service and at the end of it say what verse 34 says?

They understood none of these things. The saying was hid from them. They did not grasp what was said.

And these weren't peripheral things that were being said to them. These were important things.

First, it was in Jerusalem, which is where everything happens.

That's where the Jews and the Christians and the Muslims and that's where from the beginning the whole purpose of God has been focused on this city.

[4 : 25] And not only was it geographically at the center, it was the culmination of all the teaching of the prophets. And not only was it the culmination of the whole of the teaching of the prophets, but the life and ministry and miracles of Jesus Christ brought him unerringly towards this encounter at Jerusalem.

And not only was it to be an encounter with the religious authorities who were the Jews, the chief priests, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees.

It was to be an encounter with the Gentile world as well, represented by the Roman legions and by the Roman governor. And it was going to be the part of the Gentiles to take him and to mock him, to shamefully treat him, to spit upon him, to scourge him and kill him.

All those were to be the prescription which the Gentiles were to administer. Then, in culmination of that purpose of God, which was from the beginning of the whole of creation, on the third day he would rise again.

And they understood none of these things. The saying was hidden from them. They couldn't grasp what was said.

[6 : 02] Don't you find that strange? Because these were no fly-by-nights. These were the disciples. These were the men who were trained in the scriptures of the Old Testament.

These were the men who had witnessed the miracles of Jesus. These were the men who had followed him for three years or more. They understood none of these things.

They didn't know what was happening. I take some comfort at these words. I suppose tomorrow is going to be a very fateful day in the history of our nation.

As we go to the polls to exercise our democratic rights. And I wonder how much we understand the issue.

I wonder how important the events of tomorrow are for the history of our country. I wonder what the consequences of the choice that we make corporately tomorrow will be.

[7 : 14] I wonder what those who write the history of tomorrow 50 years down the line will have to say about us.

Whether we have understood. Whether we have comprehended the times in which we live.

Whether we know what's happening in our country. I am pessimistic enough to think that perhaps we don't thoroughly understand the issues.

And so that in that sense as a country we need to come to some understanding. We need to hear what's being said to us.

But do we? Well, I think this is very much the crux of the problem. I think it's what we call the problem of communication.

How do you come to know what's happening? How do you encounter a word from God delivered to you where you are right now?

[8 : 32] So that you understand it. So that it's no longer hidden. So that you can grasp it and take hold of it. How do we do that? Can I say in a very personal way?

1115 services at St. John's. Not in many in a marked degree, perhaps less than 930. But somehow I look at the 1115 congregation as a kind of fickle lady who needs to be courted with much ardor. And all the protestations of my love fall on deaf ears for the most. And my good intentions are misunderstood. And my suit is spurned.

But I will persist. That was a short interlude in which I was feeling sorry for myself. But what I want to get at is the fact that essential to our going on is that what's said must be understood.

And not because it's said by me, but because you and I stand together under the word of God to hear it and to respond to it.

[9 : 46] Now, it's not in a sense strange that it happens to us that we don't understand. If you were to follow this same story in the Gospel of Mark and turn to Mark chapter 9 and verse 32, this is what you would read.

The Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will arise.

But they did not understand the saying and they were afraid to ask. There's an element of fear there, isn't there? Fear of admitting that they didn't understand.

Fear of admitting that we don't comprehend. Fear of letting on that nobody knows. It's very much the story of the emperor's new clothes. Remember when the fine garments were woven for him and everybody was told, if you were a fool, you won't be able to see the garments.

And so everybody pretended that they saw when they didn't see at all. And it was finally only a little boy that announced that the king was parading down the main street in his underwear, that the spell was broken.

[11 : 11] Because everybody else was afraid of being thought a fool. If God has spoken, surely there must be some way in which we can understand.

Some way in which it cannot be hidden from us any longer. So that we grasp what it is that he's saying.

And if you look at Matthew chapter 16 and verse 22, then you will find another strange reaction. And this is to this repeated warning to the disciples of what was going to happen.

They were looking to be the sort of kings and priests and lord lieutenants of a great empire of which Jesus would be king. And he told them over and over again that what you are doing is following me to my crucifixion.

And they didn't understand. They went on dreaming about a kingdom. And in Matthew 16, verse 22, this is what it says.

[12:28] After he had made the same announcement of his suffering, Peter took him and began to rebuke him, saying, God forbid, Lord, this shall never happen to you.

They just found it totally unacceptable. It just didn't fit. And Peter spoke and said so.

This can't happen. That's not what it's all about. And so he showed how deeply for him was the misunderstanding.

How deeply for him was the thing hidden. How impossible for him was it to grasp what was happening. And so in his bluff and hearty way, Peter says, no, Lord, this isn't going to happen.

And the Lord said, get thee behind me, faith. You see, it is the truth. And it does need to be heard by us.

[13:32] Somehow we have got to be brought to the place where we can see what it is. Well, can I just conclude by saying this?

Because I really have only raised the question. But it's a terribly important question. And that is, how can we come to the place that what God has clearly said to us in Jesus Christ, we can clearly grasp so that we know who we are?

A commentary on this is given in the first epistle of Paul to the Corinthians in the 13th chapter, which was read to us this morning.

And it's said of a church perhaps not unlike ours. Though you have the ability to speak with the tongues of men and of angels, that's not enough.

And though you have the gift of prophecy so that you can speak a word from God, that's not enough. And though you understand all mysteries, that's not enough.

[14:50] And though you comprehend the vast scope of all human knowledge, that's not enough.

And though you bestow all your vast personal and corporate wealth to feed the poor of the world, that means to take it all and to wrap it up in bundles and send it to every hungry poor man in the world, that's not enough.

And though you may be so heroic and so zealous in your faith that you're willing to be burned at the stake, that's not enough.

Fairly demanding, isn't it, when you look at it. There's got to be something more. In order to comprehend what it is that God has said to us in Jesus Christ, by his life, by his death, and by his resurrection, something has to happen.

That we may know and understand. That it may no longer be hidden from us. God grant that we as a congregation, in our relationships to one another, in the exercise of the great gift that we've been given individually and corporately, that in all this, the ultimate thing might be a comfort.

Can I just show you what I mean by asking you to turn to Luke chapter 24? I won't ask you to turn. I'll turn and tell you what's there.

[16:57] Because in Luke chapter 24, there is a strange and wonderful statement that comes after the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It says in Luke chapter 24, verse 45, then he opened their minds to understand.

Then he opened their minds to understand the scripture. And what needs to happen, really, and I'm not laying this on you as something you have to do, but something God has to do for us individually, and that we must be open to let him do it.

And that is that he may open our minds to understand what he is saying to us in Jesus Christ. We hear what we want to hear.

Politicians know that well and must be bitter about it at times. We perhaps don't hear what we need to hear.

We hear what we want to hear. And the thing that stands at the heart of our Christian faith is to hear not what we want to hear, not what we desire to hear, but to hear what God is most certainly saying to us in Jesus Christ.

[18:33] So that when this whole story is unfolded through the weeks of Lent that lie ahead, we may come to Easter understanding.

We may come when the truth of the gospel is no longer hidden and the glory of the resurrection breaks in upon the most secret place of our hearts and lives when we grasp the reality of what has happened in history with the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

So that verse I commend to you as your preparation for Lent. We will understand that it will not be hidden any longer.

that he will open our understanding to what it is that he has saying to us. That having all the other gifts in abundance, we may have that gift of knowing and loving and being loved and responding to the love of Jesus Christ.

Amen.