

To Hear His Most Holy Word

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[0 : 00] Indeed, as we've listened to your most holy word, we ask that you will give us such a faculty to hear it and to obey it, that indeed your kingdom may come and your will be done.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. In your bulletin this morning on a page which is, I suppose, the third page from the back, you will have the scripture passage for the sermon on November the 19th, and I'd like you to turn to that so that we can look at it.

You will remember this is the third in a series of sermons, which is based on the introduction to morning prayer, which describes why we come together on Sunday morning and what we are here to do.

And it reads, Although we ought at all times humbly to acknowledge our sins before God, yet ought we most chiefly so to do when we assemble and meet together, first to render thanks for the great benefits that we have received at his hands.

I tried to deal with that three weeks, two weeks ago. And then to set forth his most worthy praise.

And this morning we come to the phrase, To hear his most holy word.

[1 : 42] Now the best commentary on what it means to hear his most holy word, and why it is that we gather for that purpose, is found in looking at the scripture in the bulletin.

So I'm going to ask you to read the scripture in the bulletin, and pause very briefly while I explain each verse as we go along.

So would you join me in reading, beginning at, well, at the top of the page, but it's taken from Deuteronomy. Remember, we stop when we come to the reference, because I've got to get a word in there, all right?

When all Israel is come to appear before the Lord thy God, in the place which he shall choose, thou shalt read this law before all Israel in their hearing.

Gather the people together, men and women and children, and thy stranger that is within thy gates, that they may hear, that they may learn, and fear the Lord your God, and observe to do all the words of this law.

[2 : 56] Please note of that passage that everybody is to hear the word of the law read. Every stranger, every child, every person in the community is to hear it.

It's not that the experts hear it and tell you what it says. You are to hear it. And read the next passage. I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read unto all the holy brethren.

And so Paul picks up this and continues it into the New Testament church, that again, the scriptures are to be read, and everybody is to hear them.

And the next passage. Moses told him, and every city, them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath day.

So the fundamental activity of every Sabbath day was to gather to hear the law of Moses read. That was a continuing practice that went on and on.

[4 : 08] Now there's a lot of significance to this. You know how if you go into a church and the prayers are being said, you're to stand quietly at the back until the prayer is finished.

In Martin Lloyd-Jones Church in London, which was Westminster Chapel, there if you went in during the reading of scripture, there was to be a sepulchral silence until the scriptures had been read.

That that was the great thing. And the whole of Anglican worship is built around the reading and hearing of the scriptures. The only function of the sermon is to help you hear the scriptures.

And because the fundamental transaction is that God is speaking to you through the scriptures. Read the next passage, will you?

So they read the book of all of God's scriptures and gave the sense and caused them to understand the people. And that's where preaching starts to creep in, to give the sense and help people to understand the reading.

[5 : 29] And that's the function of preaching. And then the next passage. And here you have the Lord Jesus picking up this pattern, going into the synagogue, standing to read the scriptures, and then sitting to talk about them.

And subsequently, so that you see the great honor that was given to the hearing of the scriptures, to the hearing of the word of God. And then from, then the next passage.

The next Sabbath day, in almost the whole city together, to hear the word of God. And so Paul started his preaching, and the word spread through the whole of the city, that the whole of the city might hear the word of God.

An amazing concept, isn't it? And then the last passage. Blessed be in the faith, that they have heard the words of this prophecy, to keep those things which are written in their name.

So the book of the Revelation ends, and with the continuing process of reading, hearing, doing.

[6 : 58] It's not just reading, it's not just hearing, it's reading, hearing, and doing. That that is the process that is to be initiated. And those are the scriptures that help you to see what a pattern it is.

We have had, in this parish in the last week, a very stimulating week. John Stott was here preaching last Monday.

And the church was packed. And he gave the kind of sermon of which anybody who is a preacher would say, well, that says it all. Why try and stand up and say it again?

It's all been said. And so it is with some trepidation that I stand to mumble in front of you after the eloquence and precision and thoughtfulness with which John has been gifted to make known the word of God.

And we had a vestry meeting on Wednesday night. And the vestry meeting really was an attempt for us as a parish to outline a project and then to take on that project and then to underwrite that project.

[8 : 14] And I think it makes for a very uncomfortable pew. It makes for all sorts of things boiling to the surface.

as a result of of that meeting I heard for the first time in my life something you may have heard long ago the cynic's golden rule.

Do you know the cynic's golden rule? Those that have the gold make the rules. I and it made me realize how deeply as a parish we are still divided from one another.

How difficult is the building of relationships between individual people in this congregation. Very difficult. And hard work but one that we must persist in.

it made me very much aware of that. And there's all sorts of social and cultural things about this congregation here which which makes it difficult for us to hear one another.

[9 : 36] And so it's with some sense of God's leading that at the end of this week the text that was spoken of a long time ago was that we come together to hear the word of God.

To hear his most holy word. That there is one whose authority among us is unquestionable. It's not by way of his social standing his prominence his wealth her prestige her proven wisdom or any of those things.

it's that we as a people are to hear the word of God. And that's not an easy thing to do.

We in effect are to be the ear by which the whole city is to hear the word of God. We are a kind of ear for the city.

We make it our business to hear the word of God. To sit under the sound of the reading of the scriptures so as to hear it.

[10 : 50] And that's not an easy thing to do. There was a write-up in the paper yesterday morning a book by a nun from Toronto that Fran knew a little bit when we were there Mary Jo Letty and she's writing a biography of her parents.

and I think her father was a doctor named Jack and her mother's name was Rita and Jack and Rita got married and went overseas and Rita found a way to get overseas as a nurse so that they spent the war years in Europe.

A newly married couple. There was just one paragraph which jumped out at me as I read it yesterday. She says of her father every now and then my father would buy the latest book about the history of the war and would sit in the den trying to comprehend the larger story of which he and

mom had been a part.

He rarely had time to finish the book. But you see this is why we need to read the scriptures. We need to hear the larger story of which we are a part.

Perhaps a totally insignificant part in some ways but that's why we need to hear it because it tells the larger story and we are a part of that story.

[12 : 17] And so when you turn to hearing the scriptures you're listening to the larger story in order that you might know that you are a part of that story.

Now when Thomas Cranmer laid down what we are to do he said unmistakably that there was one condition to hearing his most holy word and that was that we ought at all times humbly to acknowledge our sins before God yet ought we most chiefly so to do when we assemble and meet together to hear his most holy word.

the thing that you must bring to the hearing of his holy word is a humble and a contrite heart. That's the condition that must be met that you would that we would acknowledge our sins before God in order that we might hear.

Now the problem is of course that we tend not to hear and if you were to turn to Isaiah chapter 6 and verse 9 where you have the classical description of how people don't hear you read this he said go and say to this people hear and hear but do not understand see and see but do not perceive make the heart of this people fat their ears heavy shut their eyes lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their hearts and turn and be healed.

That this that there really is a great difficulty in hearing. It's very difficult for husbands to hear wives and wives to hear husbands.

[14 : 18] It's very difficult for fathers to hear children and children to hear fathers. It's very difficult for lovers to hear what their lover is really saying and there's always a great deal suspicion around that.

It's very difficult to hear. In fact Eugene Peterson says it's almost like the side of our head is oak and that the Lord in order to get in there has to take a drill and bit and to get to work his way in so that he can get to us.

It's very difficult to hear. And what a great thing it would be for us as a congregation if we could hear his most holy word.

Well, it's not easy. And the scriptures tell us it's not easy. There's not only individual deafness, there is corporate deafness.

You know, so that in our schools children are not to hear the word of God and that's a matter of policy. In our universities, the word of God is inappropriate and that's a policy.

[15 : 40] There is not to be a word of God which might seriously affect that thing which we consider to have supreme authority among us and that is informed human intelligence.

We are to listen for informed human intelligence articulate the questions of our day, but you can't go beyond that and say that you hear some word of God.

that is forbidden in our society. I want to talk to you for a minute about that because Canada has two cultures.

They used to be Protestant and Catholic and that was the context I was brought up in in Toronto where the Orange Parade band would go and play in front of the Catholic Church during Mass in order to try and bring the real issues out.

But in a very peculiar way in the early 60s everything changed and it wasn't Protestant and Catholic anymore.

[16 : 48] It was French and English and the battle has gone on now for these 30 years almost on the question of French and English rights and it's still going. But in the meantime the doors of immigration have been opened and we now have in Canada substantial and increasingly vocal communities representing Greeks, Italians, Caribbeans, Sikhs, Buddhists, Hindus, Dukkabors within certain limits and the native people.

Every group has got together and said if this is a multicultural country then we too deserve to be heard. Now the result of that in our world is that we're different from the United States.

We don't have a kind of melting pot in which the great thing is to become an American. And then if you have a heritage you can have that as well.

But to be an American is what is really important. In our country it's quite different. To belong to your ethnic group is very important.

To be a Canadian is of quite secondary importance in this country. So we have something quite different. Now the result has been an increasing pressure on the Christian church not to insist within this multicultural framework that there is such a thing as the word of God.

[18 : 34] Because if there is a word of God which is to be heard then we're going to destroy the delicate fabric of our multiculturalism by insisting that one group is right.

And so we're frightened by it. Way back when I was in university I learned from the philosophy class that Plato had written and given a picture of what humanity looked like.

And this is before Christ and he says that humanity was adrift on a shoreless ocean in a great raft and every current or wind that came along would carry the raft in one direction or another. so the great raft of humanity would go in one direction for a while and then in another perhaps opposite direction. And Plato sort of 400 years before Christ said what we need is a word from God. A word that will bring us to the shore and let the life for which we were born really begin. Well, that in a sense proposes the great philosophical question that what we need is a word from God.

[20 : 07] And into that world comes the gospel of Jesus Christ, a word from God. And with it a new world begins and the raft bumps up against solid ground and a whole way of life begins now because there is among us a word of God.

Well, now, we've come at a time in history when for us the great solution for all our problems is to get back on the raft and set bravely out to see and catch the first wind or current we can and go with it.

And Alan Bloom in his book, when he says, his book *The Closing of the American Mind* says this, the study of history and culture teaches that all the world was mad in the past, we always thought they were right and that led to wars, persecution, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism. While if we get back onto the raft where nobody's right and nobody knows where we're going and nobody knows what wind might come along next or what current might catch us, then we can drift wherever we feel like drifting.

And the Supreme Court decisions are only not saying here is the land, it's only saying at this moment in our history we are drifting in this direction.

[21 : 54] And subsequently they may say, and at this point in our history we are drifting in this direction. But they are never to say where we are drifting to or what our ultimate goal is.

and we've arranged our society in that way. And the thing that would destroy the social fabric that we have as a society is if somebody comes along and says, there's a word from God.

You're not allowed to say that in our society. It's a traitorous thing to say. It's close to treasonous.

And Alan Bloom says, the great problem of our society is a believer. We must not be believers. Now the church has a lot of responsibility in this situation that we're in.

The church has been given a message and the very simple function it has is to deliver that message. And the way the church appears to most people these days is that it is a like a family who are expecting a very important document.

[23 : 10] And the postman arrives at the door and they say to him, have you got the letter? And the church, like the postman, says, I've lost the letter, but I'm here.

Isn't that good enough? And the family says, no, that's not good enough. We want the message that you were supposed to bring. and if you don't bring that, you are in effect of no use to us at all, so we can dismiss you as being irrelevant.

And that's what largely has happened to the church in our society. Because the church tends to say, are we not good enough? We are a loving, caring, concerned, effective group of people within society dedicated to doing good.

good. But have you the message from God? Well, no, we've lost that. Well, you see, that's where the breakdown comes.

And that's why Thomas Cranmer insisted that the function we have as a community is to hear his most holy word.

[24 : 25] I want to conclude with just this one magnificent picture, I think, of Ezekiel. Ezekiel goes to a nightclub.

The lights are dark and people are gathered around in clusters talking to one another. And over in a corner of the room there is a man playing away at the piano, sort of background music.

And he bursts into song and in fact has a beautiful voice and it provides an entirely pleasant experience. But, see how Ezekiel is to understand it.

In Ezekiel chapter 33 verse 30, have the picture in your mind of this dinner club or night club. And there it is. And Ezekiel is told by God.

As for you, son of man, Ezekiel, your people, he looks at us like a kind of nightclub, a people gathered together, your people who talk together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, say to one another, each to his brother, come and hear what the word is that comes forth from the Lord.

[25 : 54] And they come to you as people come and they sit before you as my people and they hear what you say, but they will not do it. For with their lips they show much love, but their heart is set on their gain.

And lo, you are to them like one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument.

They hear what you say, but they will not do it. When this comes, this condition comes, and come it will, the Lord tells Ezekiel, then you will know that a prophet has been among them, that there is a word from God, which they are not paying any attention to.

You see, for us, the word of God is Jesus Christ, the living word, and we are to hear him.

And the thing that is required of us, as we are gathered together, the eternal responsibility that we have, is that as we are gathered together, we must hear the word of God, and the hearing of the word of God will find expression in what we do.

[27 : 32] Your story is only a very little part of the story, but as you hear the word of God this morning, will you take hold of it and not let go, so that what you have heard, you might make it your business to do.

And that's for all of us. Amen.