

Bible Sunday, Year C

Luke 4.16-24

23 October 2022

St Luke's

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As a child, I was taken to some fairly inauspicious places on family holidays. I remember as maybe a ten-year-old sitting in the back seat of the car, parents and grandparents around me, as we passed slowly along the winding bends of hilly west Wales. Eventually, in what seemed like the middle of nowhere, the car stopped by what looked like a pile of rocks. On closer inspection, the rocks formed a small rectangle: this was the outline of a tiny stone cottage. And in the middle of the rocks stood an obelisk, which explained the significance of our journey. For it was in this cottage that, over two hundred years ago, there lived a sixteen-year-old girl named Mary Jones. Mary had learned to read and longed to own a Bible of her own. She saved up for six long years. And eventually in the spring of 1800 she set off, barefoot as she always was, to the closest town where Bibles could be bought. 26 miles later she reached Bala, which she was able to purchase her longed-for Bible, and inscribe in it her name and the date – a book that is preserved now in Cambridge University Library.

The story of Mary Jones and her Bible is one of those short, touching stories of peoples' longing for a Bible of their own that passes through our Christian history since the Reformation. I suspect my grandmother, growing up in 1920s Cardiff, heard quite a bit of Mary Jones and her faithfulness. I find myself wondering if our pilgrimage – with her in the car – to that windswept cottage was all she had imagined it to be, in those childhood tellings of humble Mary Jones.

For as on Bible Sunday we celebrate the Bible we are, quite literally, celebrating a book (or, more precisely, a set of books – the Greek 'ta biblia' means 'books'; the Latin 'scriptures' means 'writings'). Here in

our hand [hold a Bible] we can hold 66 books, ranging from 219 words long (3 John) to 33,002 (Jeremiah). The genres range from history, to poetry, to law, to wisdom, to prophecy, to biography, to letters. They span a great time period – the Old Testament writings perhaps reaching their final form between about 1000 and 300 BC; the New Testament writings being written between about AD50 and 110. And yet within all this diversity, the Christian contention is that these writings speak truths about God – above all, the God who has become known in Christ.

So what a gift it is to be able to hold these in our hand – to be able, as Cranmer's collect has it, to 'read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest' the writings that speak of the story of God's ways in the world. The revolution brought about by Gutenberg's printing press has helped each person who seeks it to read these holy words for themselves.

And yet, if Gutenberg and his press is in any way a mixed blessing, it is in this way: we have lost the art of what it means to *listen* to the word of God. It is speaking, and hearing, that is going on in today's gospel, of course. Jesus stands up and proclaims the words of the prophet Isaiah. He then goes on to explain them in just one line: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' (As I am sure, by the way, you will agree – a quite insufficiently long sermon!)

For millennia, texts existed to be heard. King Ahasuerus, when he couldn't sleep at night and wanted diversion, did not get a detective story and read himself to sleep; according to the Book of Esther he was read to, *hearing* the words.¹ At the start of the Book of Revelation, John the seer issues letters to seven Asian cities. Those receiving them are urged not to read with their eyes but to listen with their ears: 'Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it' (Rev 1.3). Indeed, as Paula Gooder reminded us in the third of our excellent series of Autumn Talks this week, the enduring

¹ Esther 6.1, cited in Peterson, *Working the Angles*, p.90.

legacy of the King James Version of the Bible is in great part not due to its good translation (which it is nowadays not) but to its success as a translation that can be listened to.

So what does it mean for us to hear God's word today? Certainly we enact that listening every time we stand for our gospel reading. We turn to face the gospel as it is read from the centre of the church – and I know of some clergy who encourage their congregations to put down their pew sheets and *listen* at this point – to 'hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ'. I think there is good reason at times for following along in our sheets – but let's not lose that hearing entirely.

Because, we might say, the act of hearing God's word is a better model for how we encounter it than in our modern act of reading. Reading in our modern world is a lone act; internal; silent. Perhaps the nadir of reading is that silent, mindless scrolling of our smartphones we've fallen into. That's all the worse when you find two friends sat side by side, preferring to read the latest from the BBC or Facebook than to listen to the live voice beside them that offers love and hope, emotional depth and intellectual exploration far in excess of what the internet can offer. Reading does not always increase our capacity to listen. Sometimes it interferes with it.²

And it is this personal encounter involved in listening that also ensures that the gospel can never remain for us dry words on a page, a volume we can put on a bedside table. Jesus's proclamation in the Nazareth synagogue draws on the promise of Isaiah of good news for the poor. '[The Spirit of the Lord] has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' (Is 61.1-2a). This is a proclamation that demands action. Emails of complaint, well-organised online petitions, are not enough. In hearing the call of scripture we are brought into a conversation with our past, and with others, about the goods we seek. We are called to act. That might demand that we listen closely to others whose voices we have tended to ignore. Entering that conversation might be difficult for us: indeed,

² For more on this, see Peterson, *Working the Angles*, p.88.

our gospel reading today avoids the climax of the story where the inhabitants of Nazareth try to throw Jesus off a cliff for his impudence! To listen, and to speak truth, demand courage: they are risky acts.

And, above all, we are reminded that at the heart of our faith lies not a text but an individual, the word who became flesh and dwelt among us. For it is in Christ's life, and teachings, and death, and resurrection, that we encounter the fullest proclamation of God to the world. And we are called to be people who listen to that word, and act on it.

So today we give thanks for the Bible: for its impact on our lives and on billions of lives in the history of the world, Mary Jones included. We give thanks for the ways that it has led us into God's ways. And we ask: Grant, O God, that in the written word, and through the spoken word, we may behold the living Word, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.