25/10/20 Sermon for St James Bolton by Rev Steve Lees. (Nehemiah 8:1-4a & 8-12; Colossians 3:12-17)

This Sunday is Bible Sunday, a time to reflect on just how important the Bible is for us as Christians; as followers of Jesus Christ. It’s also a special day for another reason…at St James we have the baptism of Tiffany. A reason to celebrate!

The book of Nehemiah is a great book and has lots to teach us in our current situation. We are currently stuck in the middle of a pandemic, life has changed from the normal, we’re struggling through restrictions until we reach a new kind of normal. It’s been a traumatic experience, to varying degrees, for all of us. The back story of our reading from Nehemiah 8 is this: it’s the 5th century BC and the Israelites (God’s people) have been through a traumatic experience of exile. A century or so before the Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem and forced its inhabitants to live in Babylon. About 70 years later the Persians took over Babylon and allowed the Israelites to go home in various waves of migration. So, here we find the Israelites trying to rebuild their old lives; exile was tough but amid so much uncertainty, getting back to normal is proving extremely difficult. Instead of grumbling (which would be understandable!) Nehemiah is getting on with rebuilding the city. It’s tough getting the people on board, but with God’s help a hopeful future in physical terms is rebuilt…the city and its walls rise up from the rubble. However, something deeper also needs to happen & that’s where Ezra comes in. Ezra is a Bible teacher and he understands that the people need vision to go forward; they need spiritual renewal as well as physical restoration. So, all the people gather to hear the Bible being read out loud from daybreak to noon. Something amazing happens, the people realise just how far they have wandered away from how God wants them to live. Isn’t that amazing that the Bible can do that, or rather how God can do that as the Bible is read! They weep with sorrow for the wrong they have done. But something even more amazing then happens, Nehemiah and Ezra both tell the people not to weep & not to grieve because ‘This day is sacred to the Lord’. In other words, celebrate, because God is here…don’t wallow, instead be filled with ‘the joy of the Lord’ which is ‘your strength’ (v10). Celebrate but not selfishly, share with those in need ‘’Go and enjoy choice foods and sweet drinks, and send to those who have nothing prepared.’ (V10)

What has this got to do with us here and now? Well, we’re in a tough time too & in the middle of uncertainty. We may want to weep for the mess the world and our country is in & to also weep for any wrongs we have done personally. Then we must receive God’s forgiveness and His joy which will give us strength. We need to pray for the leaders in our country (and indeed of other nations) as we rebuild physically. This is likely to take a long time as the economy has taken a big hit. But we also need to rebuild spiritually. The Bible can once again be key to that spiritual renewal. I’d encourage you to read the Bible daily. Why not join in the Monday Night online Bible study at 7.0pm? The Bible refreshes our soul, the Bible gives us hope, the Bible helps us cultivate true community, and as in this passage, the Bible encourages us to be generous.

Spiritual renewal is a partnership, it primarily comes from God through The Holy Spirit shaping us to be more like Jesus. But it needs our participation, first we need to make some deliberate choices. Today Tiffany’s family and Tiffany herself are choosing to trust God, to ask God to be an active part of her life. May God bless you Tiffany, and your family, in that choice. May you, and each one hearing or reading this, discover just like those Israelites all those years ago that ‘The joy of the Lord is your strength’. Joy is a deep gift from God, a fruit of His Spirit that will grow in you as you ask God…joy will keep you going when life is tough because you know that God is on your side and God loves you, and has some amazing adventures for you ahead.

As well as making a choice for God, we also need to do the things that please God. St Paul in his letter to the Colossians gives us some tips as to how we can do that. He uses a picture of putting on clothes…so as you get dressed each morning, think of what you’ve heard today. *‘Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.* *Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.**And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.’ (Colossians 3:12-15)*

*So, a*s you put on your socks…think of copying Jesus’ loving forgiving attitude. As you put on your trousers …let love guide your life. As you put on your jumper… let the peace of Christ protect and rule your heart. As you put on your shoes …always be thankful. As you carry your schoolbag/handbag/ manbag!...keep God’s word in you at all times. As you put on your coat…live as one who is called by Jesus to make this world a better place. Tiffany, Paul, Sherilee, Georgia and the wider family, we celebrate with you today. Amen

Don’t forget…next Sunday 1st November 10.30am Holy Communion & Memorial Service for All Saints Day. Sunday 8th November 10.30am Remembrance Day Service and from 2pm Shine our online worship time for young families

Thank you for your donations to Bradford North Foodbank Harvest Appeal which has raised £538 (so far!). Thank you for your donations to St James Gift Day…there is still time to give!