

## Order of Service for May 2nd 2021

### **Being Attentive: *Word and Truth***

#### Welcome

Hello everybody and welcome to Hearsall at Home for May 2nd 2021. Today we think about Being Attentive, Word and Truth, especially reflecting on the role of the Bible in the life of the Christian. We pause now, and bring our hearts to God.

#### Call to worship

Let's hear some words from the Psalms:

Your statutes are wonderful;

therefore I obey them.

130 The unfolding of your words gives light;

it gives understanding to the simple.

131 I open my mouth and pant,

longing for your commands.

132 Turn to me and have mercy on me,

as you always do to those who love your name.

133 Direct my footsteps according to your word;

let no sin rule over me.

134 Redeem me from human oppression,

that I may obey your precepts.

Psalm 119:129 - 134

We sing now of the God who speaks to us in many different ways. *Lord, you sometimes speak in wonders.*

#### Hymn (BPW 101) **Lord, You Sometimes Speak in Wonders**

1 Lord, you sometimes speak in wonders,

unmistakable and clear;

mighty signs to prove your presence,

overcoming doubt and fear.

O Lord, you sometimes speak in wonders.

2 Lord, you sometimes speak in whispers,  
still and small and scarcely heard;  
only those who want to listen  
catch the all-important word.  
O Lord, you sometimes speak in whispers.

3 Lord, you sometimes speak in silence,  
through our loud and noisy day:  
we can know and trust you better  
when we quietly wait and pray.  
O Lord, you sometimes speak in silence.

4 Lord, you often speak in Scripture:  
words that summon from the page,  
shown and taught us by your Spirit  
with fresh light for every age.  
O Lord, you often speak in Scripture.

5 Lord, you always speak in Jesus,  
always new yet still the same;  
teach us now more of our Saviour;  
make our lives display his Name.  
O Lord, you always speak in Jesus.

Let's pray together

Loving Lord,

for the vast wonders of the universe, whose galaxies and stars beggar our  
imagination;  
for the tiny mysteries of the subatomic world, whose laws perplex us;  
for the teeming life of our planet, whose animals, birds, fish and plants delight us;  
for the creative activities of writers, musicians and artists, whose work inspires us;  
for the power of scripture, whose pages challenge, baffle and nourish us;  
for Jesus, Word made flesh, whose continuing ministry always saves us;

we give you our thanks and ask that you teach us how to hear your voice in all our experiences of life. Amen

### A version of The Lord's Prayer

And now to help us to ponder the meaning of the Lord's Prayer, we hear a radical recasting of its petitions.

O Breathing Life, your Name shines everywhere! Release a space to plant your Presence here. Imagine your possibilities now. Embody your desire in every light and form. Grow through us this moment's bread and wisdom. Untie the knots of failure binding us, as we release the strands we hold of others' faults. Help us not forget our Source, Yet free us from not being in the Present. From you arises every Vision, Power and Song from gathering to gathering. Amen - May our future actions grow from here.

(Mark Berry, Emerging Church movement.)

God's Word lightens the way so we can see where to go. Let's enjoy this song, *Thy word is a lamp unto my feet...*

### Song (WT 431) **Thy Word**

#### *Chorus*

*Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet,  
And a light unto my path.  
Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet,  
And a light unto my path.*

Verse 1

When I feel afraid  
And I think I've lost my way,  
Still You're there right beside me.  
Nothing will I fear,  
As long as You are near;  
Please be near me to the end.

*Chorus*

*Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet,  
And a light unto my path.  
Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet,  
And a light unto my path.*

Verse 2

I will not forget  
Your love for me and yet  
My heart forever is wandering.  
Jesus be my guide  
And hold me to Your side;  
Please be with me to the end, to the end.

*Chorus x2*

*You're the light unto my path.*

Well, strangely this week I myself am the subject of Saints Alive!

Saints Alive! – A reflection from David

**Nick:** So, we are sitting here with David in his garden and we are continuing on with the Saints Alive series; and rather than have David interview himself, we thought I had better do it! So, first of all, David, I guess the question that you have been asking everyone is, “How did you become a Christian?”

**David:** Well, I wasn't brought up as a Christian, although occasionally I went to church with my Mum, or was sent to Sunday school, but whenever I went to church,

everybody always looked so miserable to me, and I thought, well, it obviously isn't true. About the age of 16, I got a hold of a Gideon Bible and started reading it and thinking, "Oh, this is quite good; it's quite amazing this!" But I went to church and I thought, "Everybody's so miserable, so obviously it can't be true, otherwise they would be happy!" It seemed to me that they should be filled with joy and they didn't seem to be, to my adolescent eyes anyway.

And then at sixth form college, when I was about 17 years old, a friend of mine called Alan, who had been a very miserable kind of bloke; who never helped anyone with their homework and had the brain the size of a planet, suddenly changed and became really kind and peaceful and joyful and started giving up his seat to girls on the bus, and was just suddenly transformed. And I thought, "Wow, what has happened to Alan?" And of course, he had become a Christian, so he invited me along to his little fellowship, which was an informal charismatic fellowship, and everybody was joyful and filled with life and love and it was the missing piece in the jigsaw for me, so I thought, "Oh, maybe I can begin to believe this now".

**Nick:** At that point, what did you do to make you feel that you had become a Christian?

**David:** Well, I kind of said, "Yes" to God in some kind of a prayer, and then a couple of days afterwards, it was a charismatic gathering, and so they were very strong on an experiential sense of being filled by the Holy Spirit - So they were praying for me (I think it was in a nurse's room, actually, somewhere in Preston). They were praying for me and suddenly I was just filled with joy and love and what you could kind of call energy. Something clicked within me and I thought, "Wow, this is absolutely amazing!"

**Nick:** That obviously had a real effect on you at the time, so how does your Christian faith affect your life, obviously it did then, but continuing onwards?

**David:** Yeah, I think it's fair to say it's been a backbone for me really; it's been the framework for all of my life. The values that I have, the reason that I get out of bed in the morning, actually, the reason I get back into bed to read my Bible and pray a little bit too, the reason I relate to people the way that I do, the way I try to be kind and

accepting and listening and loving to everybody around me - it just seems to make sense of the world to me, or much of the world anyway.

**Nick:** Right, you're making things make more sense, so what do you actually find challenging about your Christian faith, are there things that don't seem to make sense?

**David:** I think that one of the most challenging things for me, certainly, is to draw a line between being simple and being simplistic. I think being simplistic and being too fundamentalist about things is to think that we've got to take this whole package deal and we are not allowed to question any of it, and I think many people find that kind of faith just untenable, they just can't really, honestly, relate to a faith. I suppose I'm thinking of things like a seven day creation, or prohibitions of women speaking in church or things like that. But at the same time, although Christian faith isn't simplistic, it does have to be very simple. It has to be simple enough for anybody to be able to understand - someone with a learning disability, somebody with a PhD, anybody needs to 'get it'. That basically, it's about the love of God being offered to people freely. And yes, we can complicate that and see it in lots of different ways, but at its core, it has to be very simple, I think. But sometimes there are people who are peddling a simplistic version of Christianity which, when I hear some of the things they might say, it makes me think, "Oh, I'm not sure that I want to be called a Christian, if that's what being a Christian is."

**Nick:** So, David, you have picked up a particular challenge by becoming a Christian minister, so that must be way and above the normal call of duty, as it were.

**David:** Yeah, it does bring challenges. I think one of the challenges is, if I am going through a hard time and I am wanting to question things and doubt things, it can be very difficult because one is professionally committed to being a believer. So there are moments when you might want to just question things; think things through in your own way, but actually the commitment I've made, my livelihood depends upon it! It can be difficult to be quite so honest, as some people may be able to be, because I do have to present core realities and the traditions of Christianity, day by day, week by week.

**Nick:** And you have to explain this to us poor mortals in Hearsall Baptist, as well!

**David:** Explain it to this poor mortal, myself, first and then, if I can understand it, I can, hopefully, get somewhere along the way.

**Nick:** So, what do you actually love about being a Christian?

**David:** I think it's just so much, so much, I love so much about being a Christian. I love to be able to worship. I love the fact that there's always someone to go to if you're in a difficult spot; you can pray about it; you can go to the Lord; you can find Christian friends to work things through with. I love the challenge of studying the scriptures, keeping it simple still, and yet trying to respect the breadth and diversity of the material that's there. I love the challenge of trying to connect the core message of Jesus with everything that's going on with the world around us, with a variety of religions and lots of different attitudes to everything, from science to sex, to space travel, to geology - just trying to think, well, what does it mean to be a Christian and connect it with all of these different things?

**Nick:** Well, certainly over the time that I have known you, David, you have had a few of sort of emotional, quite big, huge, emotional ups and downs, and so, how do you relate being a Christian to coping with those sorts of traumas.

**David:** I think that the traumas that come our way are an opportunity for us to purify and deepen faith. 'Cause I think to begin with, as Christians, we can have a kind of 'cupboard love' for God. We love him because he gives us all this stuff that we really, really like, and things go our way, but as we mature, we tend to realise that in the end it is all about that connection with God, and loving God for God's own sake, rather than for the things that God gives us.

Now obviously, that's even harder when we are not talking about things, but we're talking about people, people who we love. Losing my wife, Ruth, was obviously a huge challenge and many people listening to this have had the equivalent challenge in their life, and I know I'm far from unique in that, but for me, I think, it's been learning to trust, to really trust that Ruth is with God in heaven, in God's heart and kept safe there, and that, yes, she's in my heart; she's in my life, she's in the life of many other people who loved her, and she still lives on. Obviously, if it were my

choice, I would have had her still with me, but I have had to accept what has happened and think, “Well, love and life goes on.”

As you know, for me, the Christian faith very much is about love, and I’ve got that sense that love continues and even death doesn’t stop love.

**Nick:** That is a great place to finish. So, thank you very much, and the love will continue on in the rest of the service, I’m sure.

**David:** I’m sure. Thank you Nick.

Thanks Nick for interviewing me....

And in true *Saints Alive!* tradition, we sing one of my own favourite hymns now, *Immortal Invisible...*

Hymn (BPW 383) **Immortal Invisible**

1. Immortal, invisible, God only wise,  
In light inaccessible, hid from our eyes,  
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,  
Almighty, victorious, Thy great name we praise.
2. Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,  
Nor wanting, nor wasting, Thou rulest in might;  
Thy justice, like mountains, high soaring above  
Thy clouds, which are fountains of goodness and love.
3. To all, life Thou givest, to both great and small;  
In all life Thou livest, the true life of all;  
We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,  
And wither and perish—but naught changeth Thee.
4. Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,  
Thine angels adore Thee, all veiling their sight;  
But of all thy rich graces, this grace, Lord, impart:  
Take the veil from our faces, the veil from our heart.

5. All praise we would render; oh, help us to see  
'Tis only the splendour of light hideth Thee;  
And so let they glory, Almighty, impart,  
Through Christ in the story, thy Christ to the heart.

### Offering

Lord, you are the source of every good gift, so with gladness we follow your example and share our resources with others. Please use the gifts we share to liberate those who work in your service. Amen.

And now Peter Fearn leads our prayers of intercession.

### Prayers of intercession

Loving Heavenly Father,

As we enter May, this year seems to be moving so quickly for most people and that may be due to the pandemic, as we are continually looking forward to more vaccinations and the next easing of restrictions, rather than just living in the moment. Help us, Lord, to focus on where we are right now, and the things which need our immediate attention.

We pray for all those countries where covid is still raging, especially India and Brazil. May the governments of the world be minded to assist struggling countries with whatever they require, to ease the situations for those who are suffering.

Many countries are facing challenges such as poverty, political instability, lack of education, famine and climate change. We thank you for all aid agencies such as BMS World Mission, CAFOD, Global Care, etc. for the work they do in health education, community development, disaster relief and so on, and we ask that their staff are kept safe. We pray for Christian Aid week, for those involved in distributing and receiving envelopes, and for those who are donating money, that their giving will go to ease the suffering of many.

We pray for all church networks. In many places around the world, the church suffers under prejudice and state persecution. Freedom of religious belief should be a fundamental right and necessary for people to respond to the gospel message, and we pray, that may be the case.

We pray, Lord, that we may be attentive to the needs of people in our own country, especially those who are suffering. We pray for our leaders, both nationally and locally, and for the forthcoming elections, that those elected to office seek justice and equality within the community. We pray for the NHS, the police and all emergency services, that in spite of bureaucracy and lack of resources, they would be strong in leadership, just, honest and consistent in their service.

We give thanks for your church at Hearsall, for our minister, David, and the deacons. We ask for your blessing on them and for guidance, wisdom and your vision in their discussions and decisions, as we seek to move forward on the building project.

We take some time, Lord, for each of us to bring to you those people or situations which we are particularly concerned about at the moment.

So we pray, Lord, in the confidence that you hear our prayers and will act on them in your gracious way and in your time.

Through Jesus Christ, our redeeming Saviour. Amen

Thanks so much, Peter, for those prayers. We hear this week's Bible readings.

### Bible Readings

#### **Romans 10: 1 - 13**

**10** Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. <sup>2</sup> For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. <sup>3</sup> Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. <sup>4</sup> Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

<sup>5</sup> Moses writes this about the righteousness that is by the law: 'The person who does these things will live by them.' <sup>6</sup> But the righteousness that is by faith says: 'Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?"' (that is, to bring Christ down) <sup>7</sup> 'or "Who will descend into the deep?"' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). <sup>8</sup> But what does it say? 'The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,' that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim: <sup>9</sup> if you declare with your mouth,

‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. <sup>10</sup> For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. <sup>11</sup> As Scripture says, ‘Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.’ <sup>12</sup> For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, <sup>13</sup> for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’

### **Mark 12: 18 - 34**

#### *Marriage at the resurrection*

<sup>18</sup> Then the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. <sup>19</sup> ‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. <sup>20</sup> Now there were seven brothers. The first one married and died without leaving any children. <sup>21</sup> The second one married the widow, but he also died, leaving no child. It was the same with the third. <sup>22</sup> In fact, none of the seven left any children. Last of all, the woman died too. <sup>23</sup> At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?’

<sup>24</sup> Jesus replied, ‘Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? <sup>25</sup> When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. <sup>26</sup> Now about the dead rising – have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the account of the burning bush, how God said to him, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”? <sup>27</sup> He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!’

#### *The greatest commandment*

<sup>28</sup> One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, ‘Of all the commandments, which is the most important?’

<sup>29</sup> ‘The most important one,’ answered Jesus, ‘is this: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. <sup>30</sup> Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” <sup>31</sup> The second is this: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” There is no commandment greater than these.’

<sup>32</sup> 'Well said, teacher,' the man replied. 'You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. <sup>33</sup> To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.'

<sup>34</sup> When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

Our next song, *Jesus restore to us again*, is, I think, very much inspired by our reading from Romans 10.

### Song (WT 240) **Jesus, Restore To Us Again**

#### Verse 1

Jesus, restore to us again  
The gospel of Your holy name,  
That comes with power, not words alone,  
Owned, signed and sealed from heaven's throne.  
Spirit and word in one agreed;  
The promise to the power wed.

#### *Chorus*

*The word is near, here in our mouths,  
And in our hearts, the word of faith;  
Proclaim it on the Spirit's breath: Jesus!*

#### Verse 2

Your word, O Lord, eternal stands,  
Fixed and unchanging in the heavens.  
The Word made flesh, to earth came down  
To heal our world with nail-pierced hands.  
Among us here You lived and breathed,  
You are the message we received.

#### *Chorus*

Verse 3

Spirit of truth, lead us, we pray,  
Into all truth as we obey,  
And as God's will we gladly choose,  
Your ancient powers again will prove  
Christ's teaching truly comes from God;  
He is indeed the living Word.

*Chorus*

*The word is near, here in our mouths,  
And in our hearts, the word of faith;  
Proclaim it on the Spirit's breath: Jesus!*

Verse 4

Upon the heights of this dark land  
With Moses and Elijah stand.  
Reveal Your glory once again,  
Show us Your face, declare Your name!  
Prophets and law, in You complete  
Where promises and power meet.

*Chorus*

Verse 5

Grant us in this decisive hour  
To know the Scriptures and the power;  
The knowledge in experience proved,  
The power that moves and works by love.  
May word and works join hands as one,  
The word go forth, the Spirit come.

*Chorus*

*Jesus!*

And now, O Lord, take my humble reflections on the scripture and use them to inspire us all to be those who hear your Word and put it into action in our lives. Amen.

### Sermon

#### ***Being Attentive***

I have my Bible on my desk as I speak. It's a large print edition of the Anglicised New International Version, one of hundreds of English translations now available.

But what is it, this object I have on my desk?

If I open the Table of Contents, I can see the Bible is divided into two sections, called the Old Testament and the New Testament. Some question whether these labels are appropriate, as they are anxious that the word 'Old' might suggest inferior or preliminary, with the New Testament being seen as an upgrade of the Old. The concern is that this might offend Jews; well you might sometimes hear me refer to 'the Hebrew Scriptures' instead of the 'Old Testament'.

Anyway, these Hebrew Scriptures are listed as 39 books, and these books in turn are often grouped as the Law, Historical Books, Wisdom Literature and the Prophets. If I look at the New Testament, I find some 27 further books, and these could be grouped into Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, Letters and Revelation.

So the Bible is not a single book, but a library of 66 books written over a period of several hundred years. The various books were gathered together over the centuries and gradually recognised as authoritative.

I regard the Bible as a treasure trove of inspired texts recording people's perceptions about God. They describe stories of hearing God's voice, seeing God's presence, feeling his absence, sensing his call, fearing his judgment, responding to his challenge and trusting in his steadfast love. They tell of his gathering of a people; we hear of the consequences of their unfaithfulness. We read of God's incarnation as a man, his suffering and dying and rising again, his gathering of a church, his kingdom embracing all that is. The scriptures record hymns of praise, poems of lament, assertions of faith, expressions of doubt, cries of despair, declarations of triumph...

The text comes in all sorts of genres: poetry, history, myths, folk tales, letters, biographies, apocalypse, prophecies, parables and proverbs.

And the text is always expressed in a particular language for a particular culture. Because of that the Bible is coloured by patriarchy and yet also sometimes questions patriarchy. It challenges racism but you can find bits that might appear to support that evil. It expresses love for every person and yet occasionally appears to sanction ethnic cleansing.

Whilst there's a broadly consistent sweep of revelation, there are also factual inconsistencies and each book has its own theological standpoint - often several theological standpoints. Given all that I've said, it's absurd to claim that the Bible is inerrant, and the Bible itself makes no such claim.

The Bible is like a mountainous landscape, not a bland flat plain. It contains peaks of pure inspiration - *The Word became flesh and lived among us* - and lowland swamps of morally dubious tales of, for example, gang rape.

Since the invention of the printing press it gradually became possible for ordinary people to have complete Bibles in their homes. Since the rise of the internet we can walk around with the Bible in our pockets.

So why? Why do we read it? I read it to help me to be attentive to the work of God within me and around me. It nourishes my relationship with God. It contains the most marvellous treasures and intriguing puzzles and challenging judgments. Most of all, as a Christian I read it because it tells me about Jesus: his birth, his teaching, his miracles, his compassion, his sacrifice on the cross, his rising again, his ascension into heaven; it tells me of his cosmic significance and of his love for all humanity.

Whilst I fully respect the rights of Jews to claim a primary reading of their Hebrew scripture, as a Christian I read all scriptures through Jesus, and Jesus has the last word over any disputed matters. So I read the Bible as a way of being attentive to the God I serve, to help me sense his call on my life, and to help me grasp a little of what he might be doing in the world around me.

Now both our Bible readings today include examples of how to interpret the Bible.

Jesus is presented with a particular interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Sadducees were a sect denying the resurrection of the dead. The Law of Moses made it a requirement for a man to marry his brother's widow if he died without issue. So the Sadducees concoct a ludicrous tale about seven brothers all passing away having married the same woman. So, when resurrection comes, will she have seven husbands in heaven? That would be a bit much to handle! They conclude that resurrection and heaven therefore cannot be true.

These Sadducees made a couple of classic errors in their interpretation. For example: they first decided what they believed and then found scripture to back it up. The technical term for this is *eisegesis* - reading what you already want to find into the scripture. Another mistake: they ignored the obvious primary reason for the scripture they were reading, which was to protect a childless widow from destitution.

As regards their scenario of one woman with seven husbands in heaven, Jesus explains that relationships in heaven will be rather different from the way they are here and now. We'll be like the angels. Marriage will be superfluous, perhaps because there is abundant love in glory and so no need to seek it in one exclusive relationship.

With characteristic flair, Jesus then gives an argument from Exodus, when Moses met the Almighty in the burning bush. This God named himself as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. God is God of the living, not the dead, so the implication is that in God, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob must still live on.

When we lose a loved one we may comfort ourselves by reflecting that they live on in our memories and in our feelings - in our heads and in our hearts. Is the same true with respect to God, only to a much greater degree? In God, the very essence, the very soul of a person continues. God is the God of Ruth, my Ruth, who died on earth three and a quarter years ago, but who lives on in God.

Jesus has barely finished making this point when another challenge comes his way from a recognised religious expert - *which is the greatest commandment?* Jesus gives two quotations, the first of which is part of the Shema - a prayer Jews say to this day in their regular worship. It's a statement of the oneness of God and also a

reminder of how we are called to **love** God with all we are. Then Jesus adds a second quotation - *Love your neighbour as you love yourself*. Of course Jesus doesn't say the rest of the Jewish traditions are irrelevant, but he does imply that **love** is the key for unlocking them all.

So at the heart of Jesus' interpretation of scripture is our own belovedness, and also the belovedness of the dead, the belovedness of the widow, the belovedness of people in need, and the belovedness of our neighbour. You'll recall Luke's Good Samaritan tale which taught that anyone in need is that neighbour!

So belovedness is key to reading the Bible, but remember that belovedness is both a comfort - for you (the reader) are beloved; and also a challenge - beloved, too, is the cantankerous old man three doors down who complains about your hedge. And Jesus explicitly taught us to love even our enemies! The love of Jesus leads us into works of peace and justice.

Personally, I like to read gradually through a book of the Bible, a little each morning. I keep a spiritual journal and write down verses that have struck me, and prayers I wish to pray. In this journal I also pay attention to other ways God may be calling me: through science, through nature, through literature or music, through friends and even through those who may disagree with me. A spiritual journal could include records of birds we've heard singing; of things children have said to us; the antics of our pets; lines from great poems; things we've heard on a nature documentary... Anything that seems important or moving or lovely; anything that helps us to tune in and pay attention to God's call on our lives.

It's no surprise that very often a text I happen to read speaks directly into my life. Our gospel reading today, for example, has helped me to cope with the loss of my wife and also feel the acceptability of possible remarriage one day. It won't create a difficulty in heaven!

In his letters, the apostle Paul frequently quotes and reinterprets his Bible, the Hebrew Scriptures. In Romans chapter 10, he first of all quotes from Leviticus, a book attributed to Moses, giving detailed customs and commandments to keep God's people distinctive. The verse Paul downloads says that everyone who **does**

these things - the commandments God gave to Moses - will live. This refers not just to the Ten Commandments, but also to the numerous rules about agriculture, food, sex, economics, family, sacrifices and religion which rooted the Israelites in a particular way of being a nation. These rules are collectively called 'the Law'. Paul's point is that to belong as a Jew one had to follow **all** of the Law properly.

Then Paul quotes from another book of the Law - Deuteronomy. In these verses, the original text is surely implying it's not so hard to follow rules of the Law, which frankly rather undoes Paul's point. Anyway, the original text in Deuteronomy says (before the bits Paul's quotes): *What I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach.* Paul then gives three consecutive verses from chapter 30 of that book. The Law, says Deuteronomy, the Word, is not up in heaven so you have to climb up and get it. It's not beyond the depths of the sea, so we don't need an intrepid sailor to fetch it for us. *The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.*

Now around the time of Paul, various Jewish writers had been sensing something in these words from Deuteronomy 30. They seemed to Philo of Alexandria and Baruch, another Jewish writer, and other Jewish texts, to be hinting at something simpler, something more universal, something more cosmic, something more transferable, something more transcendent than a cultural code of customs, ethics and rules. Of course, these Jewish writers still respected the Law, but this notable passage from Deuteronomy gave the flavour of something bigger, precisely because it so was simpler. The Word is near you!

So Paul picks that up and runs with it. 'The Word', for Paul, now refers to Christ, not the Law! Christ has come down from heaven; so we needn't climb up to get him. Christ was buried in the earth; we need not descend to the depths, because he also rose from the dead. As Christians we sense what Paul means here. Christ is near!

All that humanity is looking for has been gifted in the grace of God. So the Word - now Jesus - is never far away from us. It - or he - is in our hearts and on our lips. It's not hard to hear God speak through the Bible. You don't need a theology degree, just an open mind and willing heart and an attentive attitude.

Paul was reading his Bible **through** Jesus. It's what Christians do. We believe Jesus to be the Word in human form, so of course we give him the last word in any questions of Bible interpretation. And Paul reminds us that salvation involves declaring with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believing in your heart that God raised him from the dead. This is saying that the love of Christ transforms our inner self - our heart; and our outer self - our lips, meaning our interaction with the world. Paul is saying: trust that Christ's love will shape your heart; and trust that Christ's love will gather the universe around you into a sense of oneness. In short, Paul reads Deuteronomy 30 to be about a relationship of love, not a particular culture defined by a rigid set of rules.

So being Christian is about being honest - admitting that you need help. It's about believing that the love of God in Jesus can rescue you. It's about committing yourself to living Christ's way. And today, we learn it's also about being **attentive**; deeply listening to God's call on our lives and especially doing that through some pattern of Bible reading. But as Christians, that Bible reading is simply to foster our sense of God's loving call on our lives and on the world around us.

We don't hear the Bible in a vacuum. We are attentive to God in the animal kingdom. We hear him speak through literature, art and science. Most of all, right now, we hear him speak through nature. We are attentive to the earth. The earth is like a mother to us and scientists are convinced that the climate patterns and ecosystems are dangerously out of whack because of human activity, especially the burning of fossil fuels, but also with the rampant exploitation of the earth's resources for human convenience.

So the Bible is not a dry textbook. It's not a vast set of regulations to catch us out. It's not even a handbook for life; it's far too varied and rich to be that. In itself, it's not even the Word of God; rather we hear the Word of God by connecting it with our lives and our world. It's a sounding chamber. It's an inspired record of all sorts of spiritual explorations. It's a library of books we read, but it's also a book which reads us, exposing our secret motivations and challenging our complacency.

So I invite all of us to develop our habit of reading a little bit of the Bible, maybe each

day, or a few times a week. As you read, pray that God will speak to you as you remain attentive to him.

Our closing song is, *When your pure light shines...* A song which celebrates the way in which the Lord blesses us in a personal way in its first verse, and also enlightens and blesses us in the world around us in that second verse. *When your pure light shines...*

**Song (Prue/Sutcliffe) **When Your Pure Light Shines****

When your pure light shines  
so brightly in our world,  
I see the colours change  
from greyness into glory.  
Our hearts, like coloured glass  
that were so dark and dusty,  
turn radiant and lovely  
in the glory of your light.

*Chorus x 2*

*Shine within my heart!*  
*Shine within your church!*  
*Shine ever brighter in your world!*

The broken and the lonely  
are welcome in your church;  
the hungry ones are fed  
and migrants treated kindly;  
slaves at last are freed,  
the unemployed find work,  
and mourners relearn gladness  
in the family of God.

*Chorus x 2*

*Ending: Shine ever brighter, shine ever brighter, shine ever brighter in your world!*  
And we share in the words of the grace...

### The Grace

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ;  
And the love of God;  
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit  
Be with us all, evermore.  
Amen

### Sung Blessing

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you  
Wherever he may send you;  
May he guide you through the wilderness;  
Protect you through the storm;  
May he bring you home rejoicing  
At the wonders he has shown you;  
May he bring you home rejoicing  
Once again into our doors.

Many thanks for sharing in our worship today. I hope to see some of you in the coming week. Our Tuesday morning Bible chat this week is on Zoom at 10am; please find a link on the calendar pages of our website if you'd like to join us; everybody's welcome. After that at 11:15 there's a zoom coffee morning and on Thursday at 12:15, we meet in the park. If you just want to chat and not walk, well, probably some of us will be free for a coffee or a sandwich at the cafe afterwards. Have a beautiful week everyone!