

23rd September 2018 – Hebrews 5:11 – 6:3
A CHURCH COMMUNITY THAT GOES DEEPER IN GOD'S WORD

Folks, we are continuing throughout this term to look at how the vision which God has placed on us can be worked through and lived as we move forward. And today we are considering the aspect of our Vision which centres around going deeper in God's Word. The thing that is going to have to be a decision for each of us is how important we treat God's Word in shaping us as individuals and then as we join together as a Church Community in discerning God's direction for us.

[So where do you place the importance of God's Word in your life today?]

I read a story about a missionary in Africa who gave a Bible to one of the community leaders that he had come to share the message of the Gospel with. When it was given to him, the man hugged it so tightly as it was the first time he had received a Bible. It was such a precious gift. The missionary returned a few days later and he noticed to his astonishment that the Bible looked like it was already falling apart, and that many of its pages were missing. The missionary asked him, "What happened? What did you do to the Bible I gave you? When I gave it to you I thought you considered it to be a treasured possession."

The man replied. "Indeed, it is a very precious possession. It is the finest gift I have ever received. It is so precious that when I returned to my village I very carefully chose a page and tore it out and gave it to my mother. Then I tore out another page and gave it to my father. Another I gave to my wife. Finally, I gave a page of God's Word to everybody who lives in my village. It's that precious"

Folks, the human response to God's Word will never have anyone stagnate. It will dictate a response from everyone. And forgive me that I seem very binary about this. But folks, either God's Word changes you, or you reject it and stay unchanged. Each of us needs to accept that it feeds and nourishes our souls, and therefore without it we actually starve from an abundant life that God wants for each of us. So what is that sustains you today? As both Moses and Jesus said, "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out through the mouth of God" [Deut 8:3 & Matthew 4:4]

As we journey with God as a Church family, God's Word must be central in what we do, and so this morning with our passage from Hebrews 5, we are going to look at very practical ways of how we grow deeper through his Word, how we engage further in God's Word.

So the Bible uses the metaphor of going from milk to meat, or solid food. And it uses it in 1 Corinthians 3 but also in our passage from Hebrews this morning.

So we are to move from immaturity to maturity. For many of us this metaphor is easy to understand about moving away from milk. Many of us have experienced that process in children as they finally start taking solid food, because it's not so much that they eat it, as they seem to paint it on their face [Picture of Josh eating loads of spaghetti, messy face]

An infant needs milk, and therefore it's very disturbing isn't it when we see kids a lot older who are still on the bottle. Here's an extreme case. It's actually a psychological condition called paraphilic infantilism, where this guy who is over 30 still needs a nappy, he is still fed by his mum.

And the danger in many Churches today, is that we have signs of spiritual paraphilic infantilism. Spiritually we remember that point, maybe it was our confirmation, or a point of understanding that God loved us and was willing to die for us, but we have not done anything to begin the process of growing. Many of us are still stuck on the bottle, but frankly it's time for us to grow up. We do that by feeding on God's Word.

The prophet Jeremiah 15:16 said, "When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight, for I bear your name, O Lord God Almighty". So the prophet says that when the Lord's Word came to him, it was a delight to him.

Some days when it comes to eating my lunch or my dinner, because I'm in so much of a rush, I will comment to Alison at how I've just had the meal but haven't actually tasted it. I haven't even chewed it – it's just went down. We all know that that's not natural. Our bodies need us to eat food, but then to taste it, to chew it enough times to break it down, before we swallow it, and then the body digests it, taking the nutrients from it for our wellbeing to energise us. And for each of us we need to digest God's Word – as a church family we need to go deeper. So here's some very practical steps that I think each one of us at the start of this new term needs to seriously consider building in as spiritual nourishment to take us from milk to the full blown dinner.

1. Hear the Word.

Usually the first way we all remember our experience of God's Word has been through hearing it, hearing it mainly at Church. For centuries, the Word of God across Europe was not available to openly read, also mainly because of poor education that common folk would need someone to read it to them, and so they would go to Church to hear it read. However the problem was that Church Services were conducted in Latin, which is why in Thomas Cranmer's time in 1549 he published a prayer book with texts from the Bible which could be read allowed and understand by common folk – and so came about the Book of Common Prayer. The restrictions brought about by the Roman Church were removed so that all of God's people could hear it. And yet it is scriptural for it to read in public. Consider 1 Timothy 4:13 where Paul tells Timothy, "Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching".

I'm very conscious of folks who don't get the opportunity to hear God's Word spoken, especially folks who are housebound. So as a ministry to those people, why don't you consider committing to go visit regularly and simply commit to reading a passage of scripture to them every time you call.

Maybe you yourself prefer listening to reading, and so there are many ways now of listening online to scripture being read or buying CD's for your car. Make a point of hearing it. Now if today, Sunday, is the only time that you are hearing God's Word, then you are stuck on the milk, and you need to get past that. There's more.

Next,

2. Read the Word.

Many of us are visual learners and are used to learning by reading. There are some advantages to reading over hearing, such as being able to underline, make notes, and easily revisit the text. As I said, many people down through history, either couldn't read or didn't have access to written copies of Scripture. So most of the verses about reading the Word are in a corporate setting where God's Word is being read out loud to a group. For example, Exodus 24:7 Then Moses took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, "We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey."

But it can't just be about listening to someone else read it. It's got to be about you reading for yourself. Deuteronomy 17:18–20 This is God speaking to the King - 'When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. 19 It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law'.

So the king of Israel was expected to have his own hand-written copy of the Scripture that he read every day!

In Matthew 19:4, Jesus also criticised those that had not read in the scriptures. He said to those that were questioning him, “Have you not read the Scriptures?” Unlike millions of Christians before us, and millions around the world today, we can read and we have Bibles—lots of Bibles! But what are we doing with them? I wonder how often Jesus would ask us, “Haven’t you read?”

For me, I use a study called Bible in One Year, by Holy Trinity Brompton, and so I know that my readings will cover the whole of Scripture in one year. But there are many other ways of reading through scripture. I’d recommend you read more than just a verse every day – that you are intentional to invest in your life, the most incredibly powerful Spirit-filled Words that you will ever read.

Next,

3. Study the Word.

This is where we start going deeper. When we study, we dig into what we have read. We start asking questions about the text; we look up the meanings of words; we compare what we read to other Scripture passages, and so the digging not only continues, but is also begins to shape our understanding of God and his desire to walk with us in any and every situation. Don’t just take my word for it every Sunday – examine God’s Word for yourself. I want you all to learn as much as I want to learn from God. You know it’s amazing how much depth there is to God’s Word. I can read the same passage of scripture and each time get many things from it. So take time to study it. Today I’d love you all to consider committing this next term to be part of a small group, where you have the chance to hear other people’s thoughts and examination of what a passage of scripture means to them or how it applies to daily life. Study is digging deeper to really understand what is being said.

You will all have heard of Ezra in the Old Testament. He was a priest in the mid-fifth century BC who returned to Jerusalem to help with the rebuilding after the Exile. His primary purpose was to teach people God’s Word. Ezra 7:10 says that ‘Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel’. Notice the stages of the verbs: he studied, he observed (obeyed) and he taught. It was personal and important for him to study God’s Word for himself.

Folks, study the Word – it will point you to your Saviour who wants to be involved in your every day living! Study it alone, but also study it in groups. Remember that we are creating a variety of groups for you so that you can determine how deep you want to go. Maybe you need to start with something light with a plan to move deeper in your study. Maybe today you could benefit being part of a group that is at the same stage that you are at, maybe our group in Ballyclare for parents of school-aged children. Whatever the case, take time this term to go deeper.

The final aspect of going deeper in God’s Word is the need to

4. Obey the Word of God

You know, this is why our small groups are really important. You can come Sunday by Sunday, you can even study God’s Word in your own private devotion every day, but what matters also is the need to apply it to every day living, and I believe when you share and chat with others, it allows you to think more about how God’s Word needs to be applied to your every day context. You see, you really don’t get to the meat of the Word until you do it. Put it into practice. Obey it. The reason for hearing, reading, studying God’s Word is so you can do it!

In the Book of Joshua 1:8, God instructs Joshua, ‘Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it’.

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If all we do is gather together and talk, then the mission of God which is placed on each of us is lost. I read recently that it’s better to know one verse of the Bible and do it than to know it all and not do it. Jesus put it this way: Matthew 7:24–27 “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

Hearing the word without putting it into practice is like building your house on sand. You think you’re fine because you know so much, but that knowledge is useless if you don’t put it into practice. Some of us, myself included, know far more than we do. Earlier this year I did a study on James, and those words of chapter 1 are so important when we consider going deeper as a Church, and then considering how we reach out into our community. James says this, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says”. Let’s not just be a hearer of the word; be a doer of the word. It’s in the doing that you’ll be blessed! Through our small groups we are energised to be more of a witness in the world we live in. We become doers of the Word rather than just hearers. This is the real meat of the Word. If you want to go deep, start with one verse and do it! Then another, and another.

So, our church witness, our growth, our future, relies on each of us to not stagnate in our spiritual lives. The danger with the condition of paralytic infantilism is that after a while it becomes the norm. The individual considers being fed milk as being acceptable. If we are the church that God wants us to be, being a light of hope in our community and in our culture, we’ve got to have the appetite to be fed and nourished and developed into what God wants us to be. I dare each of you to make a commitment to go deeper in God’ Word. Don’t walk from here this morning without asking yourself the question, why you would ignore being fed in your spirit through a small group, consider signing up only for this next term. Our spiritual health and wellbeing depends upon it. Every minute you invest in God’s Word will grow you closer to Jesus, make you more like Him, transform your life and your relationships, and make you a blessing in this community.

POINTS FOR FURTHER REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

1. Consider what are the things in life that can hamper our growth of going deeper in our relationship with God e.g. time, commitment etc
2. How can we tell, as believers, whether or not we are growing spiritually? Take time to consider whether you are still feeding on milk or whether you're craving for more solids (Hebrews 5:13-14). Have you ever considered doing a spiritual health check on yourself? Consider reading Carl Laferton's book – Spiritual Health Check, 16 steps to a thriving Christian life.
3. What should a professing Christian who lacks the motivation to grow do about it? How can you become more motivated? Is there a role for getting alongside a friend who you believe is not disciplining themselves to go deeper, or does that feel too intrusive?
4. There is a huge importance in modelling to our children and young people the disciplines of reading scripture. What practical ways do you think we can encourage this both within our church community and in our homes? (Any ideas can be shared with Revd Jonny for consideration). One idea would be to look at the Table Talk programme by Care for the Family – see <https://www.careforthefamily.org.uk/faith-in-the-family/parenting-and-faith/kitchen-table-project>
5. Sunday's talk addressed 4 pointers to growing deeper – Hearing the Word, Reading the Word, Studying the Word and Obeying the Word. Which area do you think you need to focus on in the months ahead?