

Hearing - Practices that form in us the mind of Christ

Series: Habits of the Heart: Practices to Commune with God and Transform your Life

Date: 26 June 2022, 2nd Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Texts: Psalm 119:97-104; 2 Timothy 3:14-17; Matthew 7:24-29

One of the things I try and do every night with my kids is read the Bible and pray with them before they go to bed. We don't always manage it, but we stick at it. We've just started reading the book of Kings. In chapter 1 we read those words immortalised by Handel and sung at every English coronation since - Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anointed Solomon king. To help us get into the text we watched the video of this being sung at Queen Elizabeth's coronation, and we talked about how the angels sang at Jesus' birth. Before Elizabeth was anointed she was given a Bible with these words, this book "is the most valuable thing that this world affords." Why is that the case?

One of the deepest longings of the human heart is to hear God speak. Friends can be made through shared experience or a shared task, but for real intimacy, we must invite others into our inner world. How do we do so? By speaking. We reveal ourselves, we make ourselves known through our words. What is true for us is true for God. He reveals himself through his Word. The book of Hebrews begins like this:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, **2** but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. **3** The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being...

The Bible is God's revelation of himself culminating in his Son, the Word of God incarnate. To read the Bible is to hear God speak.

This week in our series *Habits of the Heart: Practices to commune with God and transform your life*, we're looking at Hearing God's Word. This is the simple bread and butter discipline of reading the Bible. If you want to hear God speak, if you want to find out what God is like, read the Bible. This is why we read the Bible in church. This is why we have Bible Study groups. Today we're going to explore how to read and meditate on the Bible daily, because this is where God speaks to us. This is why the Bible is the most valuable thing this world affords.

I realise that to say that the Bible is God's Word is a big claim. If you're not yet a Christian (and maybe even if you are) you might ask, "How can you know that?" I won't directly answer that question today, rather I invite you to consider what the Bible says about itself and to have a go at reading it for yourself. In the first part of the sermon we'll briefly look at 2 of the texts we've read today and what they teach us about the Bible. And then in part 2 we'll look at the spiritual discipline of Meditating on God's word, particularly through what is called *Lectio Divina*, or Divine Reading. This is about helping the words on the page move from the head to the heart.

The Bible on the Bible

How does the Bible describe itself? There is both a simple and complex answer to this question. The word Bible is simply the Greek word for *book*. In the ancient world there were no books, there were scrolls. The Bible itself is actually a library, made up of 66 different books written over 1500 years by at least 40 authors. These began life as individual scrolls. But it is one library, bound together in a single book. In fact this is where the idea of the book, as opposed to a scroll, came from. That the Bible is a single library, a single book, stems from the conviction that behind the 66 books and different human authors there is in fact one unified story by a single author, God himself.

This is how St Paul speaks about the Bible in our second reading from 2 Timothy:

*All Scripture is God breathed.*¹ Just as our words are carried on our breath, so the words we read in the Bible are breathed out by God. Technically Paul is here referring to the Jewish Scriptures, the Tanak, what Christians call the Old Testament. But what was true for the old is true for the new as well. It is all God breathed. Now this is not to say that the agency of the human authors was overridden by God, the so-called “dictation theory” of Scripture. The Bible rather speaks of it’s dual authorship - 100% God and 100% human authors. The apostle Peter puts it like this:

The prophets, though human, spoke from God, as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.²

We could say more, but this sermon is meant to be more about actually reading the Bible, rather than explaining the doctrine of Scripture. Let me return to 2 Timothy. There we learn that the Bible does 2 things. First it makes us wise for salvation. Paul writes how “from infancy [Timothy has] known the Holy Scriptures which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ.”³ Paul here gives us an insight into his protege Timothy’s life. His mother Eunice and grandmother Lois have taught him the Scriptures since he was an infant. What a wonderful example for us to follow. The Bible makes us wise for salvation because it is through Christ that God saves us, and it is in the Bible that we learn of Jesus, who he is, what he has done, and all that that means.

Paul goes on, the Bible equips us for every good work.

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, **17** so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Do you want moral guidance? Do you want to learn how to live well? Read the Bible. Notice that because the Bible is God’s word it bears the authority of God. The right response to reading the Bible is to heed what it says, that is, to hear and obey. As we read the Bible we can expect to be taught, rebuked, corrected, and trained. To take the words of a friend or a lover and twist them to our own ends is manipulative and damages the relationship. It means we’re not listening, we’re just using the other. We cut ourselves off from the love they have for us. So it is with the Bible. We cannot twist God’s words to suit our own ends.

¹ 2 Timothy 3.16

² 2 Peter 1.21

³ 2 Timothy 3.15, cf. 1.5

What about our first reading from Psalm 119? Psalm 119 is an extended meditation on God's word. It's in the form of an acrostic poem that works its way through the Hebrew alphabet. Every line in each stanza begins with a particular letter of the alphabet. So in our reading of verse 97-104 is the *mem* stanza, and each verse begins with the Hebrew letter *mem* or "m". It is of course virtually impossible to translate this into English, but that's why you read those headings in your Bible. The thing that you can see in translation is that almost every verse of the Psalm uses a synonym for God's word. In our verses these are: decrees, law, commands, statutes, precepts, and word. The Psalm is an invitation to slow down and savour how God speaks to us through his Word and how his word can shape our lives.

97 Oh, how I love your law!
 I meditate on it all day long.
 98 Your commands are always with me
 and make me wiser than my enemies.
 99 I have more insight than all my teachers,
 for I meditate on your statutes.
 100 I have more understanding than the elders,
 for I obey your precepts.
 101 I have kept my feet from every evil path
 so that I might obey your word.
 102 I have not departed from your laws,
 for you yourself have taught me.
 103 How sweet are your words to my taste,
 sweeter than honey to my mouth!
 104 I gain understanding from your precepts;
 therefore I hate every wrong path.

It's a beautiful picture. God's commands make us wise. His words are sweeter than honey. They teach us how to live life as it was made to be lived, how to be truly human. So then, let us take up Psalm 119's invitation and explore how we can meditate on Holy Scripture that we might hear God speaking to us.

Meditating on Holy Scripture - Lectio Divina

There are different ways that we can read the Bible and hear God speaking. Our Bible Study groups are a place to wrestle with the Scriptures together to work out what they mean and how they apply to our lives. There is the public reading of Scripture in church and the expounding of Scripture in preaching. These are forums where we seek for an accurate and faithful understanding of the text. We can however also read the Bible in a more devotional way. This is a reading that moves from the understanding to tasting and experiencing God through his word. It is about coming into God's

presence and listening for his particular word to me for today. Sometimes we can pit reason against experience, the head versus the heart. But we need both.

We're going to look at an ancient method of meditating on Scripture called *Lectio Divina*, or Divine Reading. My hope is that you can have a go at this in your daily Bible reading. *Lectio Divina* has 5 stages, in Latin they are, *Silencio, Lectio, Meditatio, Oratio, and Contemplatio*, in English these are, silence, reading, meditating, praying, and contemplating. Let's run through each.

Silencio. This is the quiet preparation of the heart. Come into God's presence. Slow down. Relax. Release the chaos and noise in your mind to him. Ask him to speak to you.

Lectio. Read a short text of Scripture. You might systematically read through books of the Bible in bite size chunks. If you're reading the Bible through the year or following the lectionary, then just focus on one of the texts. Read it slowly and out loud, lingering over the words so they resonate in your heart. If a word or phrase catches your attention, stop and attend to what God is saying to you.

Meditatio. Meditate. Read the Scripture a second time out loud. Savour the words. Ponder them in your heart like Mary. Turn it over gently in your mind. You could ask the following questions. Why is God showing this particular verse or truth now? What is this verse teaching? What does this show me about God? How can I adore him for this? What wrong thoughts, feelings or behaviours happen when this truth is forgotten? What can you thank God for in this text? How does God give you this in Jesus? What do I need from God if I am to realise this truth in my life?

Oratio. Prayer. Read the Scripture a third time. You have listened to God, you've examined your own heart in meditation. Now you can begin to respond by praying back the Scripture to God. You could pray back those steps in meditation. Pray adoration back to him. Pray your confession back to him. Pray your thanksgiving back to him. You may recall a moment from Jesus' life where he demonstrates this attribute. Thank him for what he has done. Pray your request back to God. Ask him for what you need to be and do what this truth points to. These are structured suggestions. You may just speak to God about what this text has raised for you.

Contemplatio. Contemplate, rest and wait. Let God's word sink deeply into your soul. Often during *lectio, meditatio, or oratio*, you begin to get a sense on the heart of the truths you are reflecting on. That is the truth is moving from your head to your heart. This is that sense of sweetness that Psalm 119 talks about:

How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!

Or it may be a sense of illumination, an Aha! On occasion you may receive a deeper sense of infusion, a more powerful sense of God present and speaking to your heart. Your soul becomes more passive,

simply receiving. Surrender yourself to God. You may receive a deep assurance of belonging to God. You may find yourself deeply moved, overwhelmed, even physically affected.

Contemplation is a gift, it may strike you anywhere in your time of devotion and may be fleeting or prolonged. God is passing you by, and you aren't consumed because you are hidden in Jesus. You cannot force it, it's a gift. But you can simply gaze in wordless adoration of what you've seen of God in his Word to you. Before you leave, consider what of God's word you can hold onto for the day.

There are many different pictures of God's word in Scripture. I sometimes think of it as an anchor amidst all the other voices that we hear each day. Jesus finishes his Sermon on the Mount with these words,

Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house upon a rock.⁴

Let's finish by briefly stepping through *Lectio Divina* on this verse.

Silencio. We are here Lord Jesus. Speak to us through your word.

Lectio. Hear God's word to you today.

Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house upon a rock.

Meditatio.

Everyone who hears these words. Everyone. That is us as St George's. That is me today. That is for those I love. That is even for my enemies.

These words of mine. This is Jesus speaking. The Word of God. God himself come in the flesh. The one who stilled the storm with a word. The one who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Puts them into practice. Do I put Jesus' words into practice? Why don't I? Do I not trust him? But he is true. And good. He loves me. He wants my good. He gave his life for me. His love is better than life.

Like a wise man who built his house on a rock. I want to be wise. I want that foundation. Life seems chaotic, out control, shifting sands. He is the rock higher than I. He is our strength and refuge.

Oratio. Father, thank you that Jesus' words are for me. Jesus, you alone are the rock. I'm a fool to build my life on anything but your word. I confess I've got some rooms built on the sand. Help me to build my life, brick by brick, every part on your word. When it's fine and life is good, help me to not run from Christ. When the storm comes, thank you that you are eternal and you hold me by your mighty power and you will not give way. **Amen.**

⁴ Matthew 7.24