

Over the past five years I have referred to a poem titled, 'I have a dream'. It talks about what church might be like and I have talked about it and used it as a guide to the kind of church I would like to be part of. We have used it at Elders conferences and other events to help us think about our vision for the future and at our last Elders day we decided that it expressed where we, as leaders of the congregation, wanted to get to. Because of that we will, every so often, refer back and see where we are and where we still need work. Last week we thought of church as a place of worship where people expect to encounter God and there is a spirit of both celebration and awe.

Next week we'll think about church as a place of prayer where we see answers to our prayers.

Today though we're going to think about church as a place where God's word is central to all we do and we have an expectation that God will speak to us as we hear or speak his word.

So, if you'll turn with me in your bible to 2 Timothy 3:16-17 *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.*

I can't help but notice that very few of you turned to that passage in your bible. In fact, in common with many churches, we have done you a disservice by not encouraging you to bring a bible and using it when the passage for the day is read, or referring to the verses I quote. The very act of finding verses brings a familiarisation with where books are and it also enables you to make sure I'm not lying or misquoting when I refer to a verse. I would encourage you to bring your bible every week and to use it.

What's so important about God's word? [Pic of dusty bible] Surely the clue is in the question – it's God's word! It is God-breathed! I believe that Holy Spirit inspired different people at different times in history to write down law, prophecies, stories, history, poems and songs, and letters and through all of these God is able to communicate to people of all ages and all races.

The bible is not just a history book, although there is history in here.

It is not just a story book about the prophets and Jesus, although there are stories in here.

It's not just a book about prophecies and what the future holds, although that's in here.

The bible, is the living, power filled words which have come from the mouth of God through the Holy Spirit, pen to papyrus, spirit to word, the mind and heart of God's plan to redeem man and repair what was lost because of the fall of man.

The bible is a record of the beginning of our time, straight through to the end of our time.

God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end of all that is, all that was and all that will ever be.

This book is our key to a relationship with the Lord, from where we gain knowledge and understanding so that we can weather the storms in our lives and grow in the Lord.

This book holds the mysteries of life and death, the understanding of the ages that were and are to come.

It is God-breathed, it brings life – salvation, grace, redemption, forgiveness, healing, love, mercy in its words - and it equips us to serve God and others.

Romans 10:17 *So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.*

Faith comes by hearing the word of God (and hearing includes physically listening to it being read, reading it ourselves, listening to sermons or studying it):

- we cannot believe it in the first place if nobody tells us about Jesus,
- then, as believers, we need to read it, study it, take it in – we need to allow the words of the Lord to fill our hearts, overflow from our mouths into our actions and the Holy Spirit will make our faith ALIVE!

Do you ever feel you lack faith?

Do you look at other people as they serve Jesus and think, “I could never do that?”

Do you find it hard to talk to other people about God? Do you find it hard to pray?

Do you wish God would make his plans for you a bit clearer?

Well, READ THE BIBLE! Faith to follow, faith to speak, faith to pray comes by hearing.

We need to gain the wisdom that comes through the word. How can we obey God if we don't know what he expects or wants from us?

The Word of God helps us understand the Will of God. I might believe that I should be a thief and steal from other people to make a living – but if I read the bible I will find that is not something God would have me do. You might want to have an affair with your best friend's husband but the bible is quite clear that is not appropriate. Of course, it's not quite so easy to work out what career you should have, or where you

should live – and just because David was instructed to go and fight the Philistines doesn't mean you should too!

We need to ask God to help us understand his word as we read it.

2 Timothy 2:15

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.”

You cannot handle the word of truth if you do not know the word of truth.

You cannot present yourself to God as one He approves of if you cannot correctly handle the word of truth.

We can never fully know or understand all, but we can have understanding and wisdom.

Proverbs 4:4-5

*“4 he taught me and said,
“Lay hold of my words with all your heart;
keep my commands and you will live.
5 Get wisdom, get understanding;
do not forget my words or swerve from them.”*

God's word brings wisdom and understanding – that doesn't mean that we can't learn from other people or other books but we can't properly understand how to live for God without his word.

There are times when we find things difficult and sometimes it is because we haven't read or kept God's word, we have no knowledge or understanding – we try to resolve things using our own understanding.

Isaiah 5:13

*“Therefore my people will go into exile
for lack of understanding;
their men of rank will die of hunger
and their masses will be parched with thirst.”*

Exile because of lack of understanding of God's word. God was angry with the leaders of his people. They were promoting drunkenness and debauchery; stealing from the people; not fighting for justice – and as a result God was going to bring judgement on all of the people. That's one reason you need to think and pray before taking on the role of Eldership in the church – leaders of God's people are judged to a higher standard because they have taken on responsibility to lead and set an example.

That's why the people in Josiah's time were so relieved to have rediscovered the Book of the Law – God's word brings life, wisdom and understanding.

Jesus thought that knowing God's word was vital – when being tempted his reply to satan was, "It is written....."

When religious people were trying to trick Jesus we find his reply in Matthew 22:29 *"Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God."*

It is the scriptures, the word of God we are to live by and nothing else. Not popular opinion, not majority votes on right or wrong, not traditions we have developed over the years.

Mark 7:13-15 *"Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that." 14 Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. 15 Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.' "*

You nullify the word of God by putting traditions first –Is there something we do because it is our tradition but if we thought about it more fully we would find that it nullifies the word of God?

It's what come out of you that makes you unclean – and what comes out gives a real insight into your true character. If you speak badly of people, if you think the worst of people, if you constantly gossip, if you are always angry or anxious, then that is what you are full of in your heart. The word of God says so.

But if you fill your heart with the word of God by reading or listening to it, you will grow in knowledge and understanding and your faith will grow.

Jesus says about the word;

Luke 11:28 *"He replied, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it."*

John 14:21 *"Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him."*

Do you love Jesus? Then read His commands and obey them. That is a sign that your faith is genuine – you read, understand and apply his word. But look at the promise that goes with it – those who love God know the love of Father and Son but there's more – Jesus will reveal himself to us as we read his word.

Want to know what God is like? Read his word. Want to know how you should live? Read his word. Want to know more about Jesus? Read his word!

My promise to you is that I will do my best to listen to God, to study and prepare, so that I can present to you a message that is faithful to God's word and pray that God would speak through it. I will not shy away from difficult to understand or hard to apply passages but will, to the best of my ability, present the whole counsel of God. But you need to do your bit too – **READ HIS WORD** and do what it says!

Finally there is one more thing.....