

Let's Pray – Help us in seeking you Lord, that we may find you to be closer and more alive to us today than we expect.

I apologise in advance that I'm going to make us all feel a bit uncomfortable this morning, not because I want that, I know I'll have to take the hit for it but because I want to talk about one of the ways God is revealed to us that requires active participation and talking to one's neighbour.

We are in Epiphany and epiphany is about God revealing who he is, in the person of Jesus.

Thus far in epiphany Sundays, Jesus has been seen as the one to whom all nations will come, heralded by the journey of the magi – the three kings – to see the infant. As, *'my Son, in whom I am well pleased'*, at his baptism. As the agent of God's transforming work, in turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana, as Geoff preached last week.

Today, Jesus is revealed as the Word.

He is revealed as the one who speaks, and who forms the words of our longings, and has done since the beginning of time. We hear this proclaimed on Christmas Day from the prologue of John's Gospel "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us".

Let's go back in time to the earliest days of humans acknowledging that there is a God. From those earliest days, the people of God have striven to hear and understand who God is, what it is he is showing them and asking them to participate in. They have been asking for help, to be saved, and watching for the signs of that. They have been recording all of this as scripture, through people who have been extraordinarily inspired with understanding, or visions and prophecies. In other words, from the beginning, God has spoken to his people, and spoken through this element of the Trinity, the Word, who shows himself at a moment in history as the person Jesus.

In today's gospel story we hear how Jesus stood up in the synagogue, and how those gathered to hear the word of God from scripture, heard Jesus deliberately choosing a passage from Isaiah and claim that it was all about this moment, and about him, and what he was chosen by God to do. No wonder their eyes were fixed on him! And great consternation followed!

This still holds true. We too, can receive a Word from God. We acknowledge Jesus as 'the Living Word' because he is able to speak to us still through scripture, as the Word.

Various practises have evolved for ways in which to hear God through scripture.

A project with Primary schools called 'Open the Book', allows children to dress up and participate in the telling of scripture. The title is taken from the first passage we heard, and no doubt there are prayers beforehand for 'the ears of all the children to be attentive', and they are: Brandon Methodists report that children love it.

That first passage describes something like modern preaching: the bible is read to the gathered and the appointed person offers interpretation for today; we listen for relevance to our life and evidence of the faithful loving nature of God which we can rejoice in.

Monks practised reading in a prayerful way expecting the text to reveal specific meaning for them, a practise called *lectio divina*. The variation on this that we have been introduced to through pmc (partnership for missional church), is *Dwelling in the Word*. And yes, please humour me, we are going to do a bit of that to remind ourselves how that works.

In brief: I'm going to read a short extract from the second reading on your sheet which we've not yet heard, give you a minute silence, read it again, another minute's silence, then ask you to say to your neighbour what came to you.

Essential additional instructions! :

1 – be relaxed, expectant and un-worried about whatever happens: leave that to God, your job is just to be willing to give it a go.

2 – this is not bible study. It is **not** knowledge based at all. Its not 'what you think the story is about'.

3 – What it **is** about, is noticing something for yourself. Noticing what one word or short phrase catches your attention. Maybe surprises you. Maybe stands out more than the others as if in bolder type.

4 – Let that word or phrase sit in your head and possibly trigger a thought, or link to something recent. After the second read through and minute silence, I will say "turn to your neighbour", and you take it in turn to say what caught your attention.

5 - The listener listens carefully and adds nothing – its not discussion. There are no right answers: what caught your attention is simply a fact; its what caught your attention. If nothing happens, that's okay too, and you can just say that.

To recap: I read – then 1 minute – I repeat reading – then 1 minute – I say "turn to your neighbour", you say what caught your attention & the other listens – I'll give you 2 minutes for that. There are no right answers!

This is from Paul writing about how, as church, we are all one body:

²⁰ As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' ²² On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴ whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, ²⁵ that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.

Read – 1 minute – Repeat reading – 1 minute – “turn to your neighbour” - 2 minutes – Stop!

The practise of Dwelling in the Word makes listening an important component. How effective were we at listening?

Turn again to your same neighbour and see if you can reiterate what you heard them say, in brief, in their vocabulary. You have two minutes!

... 2 min - Stop!

I believe in the right of redress, so, lastly, in good humour, mark each others' listening: was it acceptably accurate? 1 min – stop!

Thank you for the extent to which you were able to participate. I know this frustrates many of you. However, as God's people doing God's work, we need to practise ways of listening to God and each other, well. This method has been demonstrated to be a channel for doing just that. It teaches us to pay quality attention to each other and to God. To ponder the thoughts, discomforts and longings that a Word from God can trigger. Listening and sharing God's Living Word is done on a level playing field because its not knowledge based: we are offered insights by each other that can re-set our ideas and our relationships. We will be reviewing this but perhaps we should cautiously continue the practise, and persist in our learning to listen humbly.

Amen