10am Parish Communion Sunday 25th October 2026 – **Bible Sunday**
Neh 8:1-4a, 5-6, 7b-12; Col 3:12-17; Matt 24:30-35 – ***The power in hearing God's word***

We all know the power of a public address. From Elizabeth I inspiring the troops at Tilbury, to the late queen Elizabeth II getting us through the Covid lockdowns with the promise that we would meet again. From Winston Churchill's *"this was their finest hour"*, to Martin Luther King's *"I have a dream"*, there is nothing quite as powerful as gathering together and being challenged, and inspired, together.

Today is Bible Sunday, which is an ideal day to ponder upon the power of the word of God to stir us to respond to him, especially when we hear and grapple with God's word together.

In our Old Testament reading from the book of Nehemiah we are ***in the square before the Water Gate***, set into the wall of Jerusalem. Seventy years after the Babylon Empire destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple and took all the young and able-bodied off to exile in Babylon, the people of Judah are back in Jerusalem. The walls and the Temple are being rebuilt, under Nehemiah, their new Governor. The people are not in the Temple precincts (where only men are allowed), and we are told, twice, that this is an ***assembly [of] both men and women and all who could hear with understanding***.

It is the people who have urged Ezra, the priest, ***to bring the book of the law of Moses***. We heard that ***the ears of all the people were attentive.*** They are hungry for a re-set, to make a new start with God. Ezra is only too delighted to comply and to open God's word; we're told elsewhere in the Bible that Ezra had ***set his heart to study the law of the Lord, [to live by it] and to teach the [law] in Israel***. Ezra ensures that what he reads to the people will be audible: he ***stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose.*** And he ***[opens] the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people.***

We all know that audibility is critical. I'm sure I'm not the only one who is heartily grateful for the legacies from the much-loved parishioners which enabled us to invest in a new audio-visual system. We all appreciate the prayerful preparation of those who stand up and come to the front on a Sunday and read the Bible for us. And I'm thankful too, for the faithful work of those who have taken the trouble to locate the page numbers for our readings and to include them on the St John's website and in the pew sheet.

Rather as we did for our Gospel reading just now, when Ezra began to read God's word, ***all the people stood up.*** And right from the start, the focus is on God, as Ezra ***[blesses] the Lord … [and] the people [answer] "Amen, Amen", … lifting up their hands [and] bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord.*** Hearing God's word as a body, and worshipping God as a body, combine naturally together. Each flows out of the other, as we respond to God's word with singing, or are reminded again that the lyrics of the hymns that we sing are grounded in what God has revealed to us through his word.

The people at the Water Gate are listening to ***the law of the Lord*** which we know as the first five books of the Old Testament. They tell the history of God's relationship with the people of Israel and Judah; of how God made a covenant with them, and rescued them from slavery in Egypt, and gave them rules to live by so that they might learn to live as redeemed people, that they might please God and might prosper.

Crucially, the Levites – the ones who were exercising a priestly ministry – ***helped the people to understand*** what they'd heard, by ***[reading] from the book, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.***

Here at St John's, James and I and all of us are blessed with a wealth of people who can help us to understand what we're listening to when we have heard the Bible read to us, from our Associate Priests, to our Licensed Lay Ministers, and to our ordinands. And next month we're delighted that we will be welcoming to preach at our 10am Sunday services the Rt Revd Dr Christopher Vijayan, a bishop in the Church of South India, and the Revd Angela Tilby, the

well-known Church Times columnist and former broadcaster, and author of a new book about the Church, who enjoys a special connection with St John's.

And it is not only in our Sunday services that we can dig a bit deeper into God's word. We can do this in Soul Space on a Wednesday evening and in the regular bible studies in our small groups.

But we shouldn't take this for granted. This year in the UK we're celebrating the 500th anniversary of what is, arguably, the single most crucial development in the wider church's mission to bring the good news of Jesus to the world. In 1526 William Tyndale published the first-ever *English* translation of the New Testament. Tyndale was propelled by the belief that if English people could read and hear the Bible in their own language, they would be able to relate directly to God. They would not need to go through an intermediary.

Tyndale's English New Testament was published in Worms in Germany because translating the Bible into English was forbidden in England, Tyndale's project having been condemned by the Bishop of London. Tyndale had had to travel to the Continent, where such work was permitted. Printing his English New Testament in Germany, using the cutting-edge technology of the printing press, meant many copies could be made both quickly and cheaply. But those copies had to be smuggled into England, hidden in bales of cloth and clandestinely distributed.

Tyndale's work, and the theology that inspired it, was met with fierce resistance. The Bishop of London was so keen to stamp out Tyndale's influence that he bought copies of Tyndale's New Testament in bulk and, in October 1526, burned them on a bonfire in the shadow of Old St Paul's.

Tyndale himself faced growing persecution. In 1535, he was charged with heresy and spent 16 months confined to a cell in Vilvoorde Castle, near Brussels, until on 6 October 1536, he was tied to a stake and garrotted; after death, his body was burned.

But it was too late to stop what Tyndale had begun: Tyndale had already placed God's word into the hands of ordinary people, in the belief that anyone,

whatever their role or status, could approach God directly in prayer and in faith.

There is undoubtedly power in reading and hearing God's word; power which cannot be thwarted by any human authority or machination. The people assembled at the Water Gate in Jerusalem ***wept when they heard the words of the law***. Hearing of the goodness of God and of his faithfulness, being brought face-to-face with the depth of God's love and the frequency of his forgiveness - that love which finds its fullest embodiment in the cross of Christ - being convicted by the Holy Spirit of their own sinfulness … No wonder the people's response is heartfelt, and it is not surprising to hear that three times Ezra and the other Levites needed to tell the people ***Do not mourn or weep; and do not be grieved.*** The people needed to hear that ***the joy of the Lord is your strength.***

On this Bible Sunday we can be hugely grateful to William Tyndale and to all the people who have laboured to give us the Bible in our own language, in translations that are both accurate and accessible. It is because of William Tyndale - and the people who helped him to put the Bible in English into the hands of English people – that we can, like the people who were assembled at the Water Gate, ***make great rejoicing because we have understood the words declared to us***.
Let us never take for granted all that enables us to say: This is the word of the Lord; thanks be to God.