

MATTHEW 4:12-25
HEARING OR IGNORING?

Have you been following the Leveson inquiry? It has been fascinating to watch this week, when the Murdochs came to the table to answer questions and the furore that some of this has caused in media and political circles! As far as I can see, it is all about influence; the owners of newspapers are looking to influence decisions that will give them an advantage over their competitors, giving them better stories, bigger headlines; politicians are looking for influence with people of power so that their story is told and people will vote for them in greater numbers. It is all about influence! Newspapers and TV have huge influence over our society; there are thousands of people whose view of life is shaped by *The Sun* or *The Times* or by what they see on *Sky News* – it is a simple fact of life; this is the reason why the Murdochs are courted and why they make headline news this week.

What influences us? What are the forces that shape our lives? Actually, there is a huge number of them, too many to list all of them now. Our upbringing, family, peer group, the newspapers and magazines that we read, the websites that we visit, the social media we use, our prejudices, the TV programmes that we watch, the films, the theatre that we go to, the people we work beside, our politicians, our experience of school, college, or university and so on. All of these influences and more shape our view of the world; we are the product of all of this going on around us and some of it we take on board deliberately and some just happens. As Christians, what shapes our faith? This too is a big question. What shapes the things we believe? What shapes our view of God, the world, ourselves? What shapes the way we behave? Again there would be another list and some of the same things would be there, if we're honest; we are shaped by the views of our friends, we are shaped by our upbringing, we are shaped by our experience of Church.

As Christians, we'd want to add the Bible to that list. Traditionally, historically, the Church has built its faith on the teaching of the Bible, but is it as straight-forward as that? The Church of Scotland says in its constitution that the Bible is "its supreme rule of faith and life", the influence above all others in what we believe and say. As a congregation we have said that we seek to be Bible-based in all that we are and do. But is it as straight-forward as that? The statistics tell us that only 1 in 10 Christians in Scotland regularly read the Bible; if we don't read it, then it can't influence us! When we do read it, we struggle to understand it. When we do understand it, there are times when we just dismiss it because it is too uncomfortable; we understand its demands only too well, but decide to ditch it for something else!

Matthew tells us two stories today that show two very different attitudes to the Bible and Jesus' teaching, a very clear contrast that highlights this whole question about the kind of actual influence the Bible has on us as God's people. Both come from the beginning of Jesus' ministry and take place in Galilee. Jesus had gone to live in Capernaum, a town that became His home base. The beginning of His ministry became the opportunity for some to become disciples.

"When Jn..." (Matthew 4:12) Jesus had gone home; He had been brought up in Galilee, in the village of Nazareth and now He has moved house to Capernaum, but still in Galilee. He was to travel: He made several trips south to Jerusalem and other places, but Galilee was home-town territory! He obviously made an impact on that part of Israel:

people knew Him and listened to Him; Matthew describes how Jesus preached in the synagogues and healed the sick and made a big impact on that small corner of the world. God is obviously at work in Jesus and through Him in His ministry in Galilee. Not only that, Matthew places alongside this present ministry of Jesus, an Old Testament prophecy that the Messiah will come from and work in Galilee. It comes from the very famous prophecy in Isaiah 9, the piece that goes on to tell us that “to us...” (*Isaiah 9:6*) But that passage begins by telling us that “Galilee of the Gentiles” will be the place where this all takes place. For 800 years, the people of God had known that Galilee would be the centre of God’s plans. This Bible piece had shaped their faith and their hope and their attitude to Jesus? Not entirely!

“Heathenish Galilee” – it is not an attractive description, but is the way “Galilee of the Gentiles” has been understood by some. It is surrounded by Gentiles, nations other than the Jews; these Gentiles had lived there for a long time. “The great roads of the world passed through Galilee; it was on the way to everywhere” (Barclay) So new ideas and influences were bound to come. God had said that Galilee would be the centre of His plans and light would come to Galilee and out of Galilee. But some of the Jews didn’t like it; there was a whole school of thought that stood against any idea of God doing this; Jerusalem had to be the centre of God’s plans, they believed; nothing good came from Galilee: Look into...” (Jn 7:52) Their view was shaped by their prejudice. On the one hand, we have this clear bible promise that God’s Messiah and God’s blessing will come from Galilee and on the other hand, people who refused to believe it and accept it and when Jesus came refused to believe Him. These were people who, if you asked them, would say that believed the Bible and lived by it and were keen to read and learn it, but when push came to shove, they ignored it and rejected it. So the Bible is ignored!

Here are a couple of pictures to contrast with that.

1. Jesus’ disciples: This is slightly different, I know that, but it is a similar situation: Jesus preaches: “repent...” (*Matthew 4:17*) “Come follow...” (*4:19*) the disciples hear Jesus say these things and they accept them. Not only do they believe Jesus, they do it. “Follow me” is perhaps the simplest description of the Christian in the whole Bible, the Christian as the person who follows Jesus. For Peter and Andrew, James and John, following Jesus is not just a nice ideal; they actually became disciples; they went with Jesus; they listened, they learned and they became, in practice, the people that Jesus wanted them to be. They followed.

2. Ezekiel – the prophets were sometimes asked to do strange things to get God’s word across to His people. Ezekiel is being sent to people he knows well; his mission is at home; he does not have to learn a foreign language; but he is sent to people who will be obstinate and stubborn. God calls him to be a prophet with a vision of a scroll. “Then I looked...” (*Ezk 2:9-3:3*) “Eat this book” and Ezekiel did eat it and then was to go to preach the message of the book he had just eaten. It is described as “letting a very slowly dissolving lozenge melt imperceptibly in your mouth.” (Eugene Peterson) The Bible got into his heart, into his soul, into his whole being. So his life, his faith, his ministry are all shaped by this book. All that Ezekiel was and did as a prophet was shaped by letting this book, this scroll into his system. So the Bible is embraced.

What do you do to feed your body? You eat and drink. How do you feel when you’ve not had anything to eat or drink for a while? You are hungry and thirsty and so you take steps to satisfy that hunger and thirst. If you don’t eat or drink when you’re hungry or thirsty, it becomes chronic, you lose your appetite and if that situation is allowed to

continue, you become ill and may die. What do you do to feed your faith? There are several things that God has given to us to feed our faith: the church is one and we come to Church to worship God together and listen to the Bible being read and preached and that is good. Prayer is another and we pray here as part of Church. The Bible is the third and we read the Bible here and I preach it. But there has to be more to our diet than that! I can see a day coming when Christians in Scotland don't know their Bible, when Christians can't tell you what the Bible says about Jesus, about life, about ourselves because we don't read it. If that is allowed to continue then our faith will shrivel and Christianity in Scotland will die and the Church become a social club. All because our faith is not fed!

"Eat this book." Here's how Eugene Peterson understands that sentence. He says "these are words intended... to get inside us, to deal with our souls, to form a life that (matches) the world God has created, the salvation He has enacted and the community He has gathered... reading that enters our souls,... spreads through our blood and becomes holiness and love and wisdom." He suggests that the bible needs to get right inside our whole being so that we live by it in every way. There are words in the Bible about God, but our understanding of God and universe is shaped by other things, such as superstitions; there are words about Jesus, but we accept what other people say because it is more attractive; there are words about Church life, but we prefer our own way because it was always done that way; there are words about personal behaviour and the way we get on with other people, but we don't do it because it is too hard or we don't want to do it! It is easy to say that the Bible is "the supreme rule of faith and life" and say that the Bible shapes and influences our life, but in practice, when push comes to shove, when the rubber hits the road – does it really? Or is our Christian faith, our life, our Church shaped by a completely different set of values?

Imagine a group of people in a huge warehouse. They were born in the warehouse, they grew up in it and have everything there for their needs and comfort. There are no exits to the building, but there are windows. However, the windows are thick with dust, are never cleaned and so no one bothers to look out. Why would they? The warehouse is everything they know, has everything they need. But then one day one of children drags a chair under one of the windows, scrapes off the grime and looks out. He sees people walking on the streets; he calls to his friends to come and look. They crowd around the window – they never knew a world existed outside their warehouse. They notice a person out in the street looking up and pointing: soon several people are gathered, looking up and talking excitedly. The children look up but there is nothing to see but the roof of their warehouse. They finally get tired of watching the people out on the street acting crazily. What would happen if, one day, one of these children cut a door out of the warehouse, coaxed his friends out and discovered the immense sky above them and the grand horizons beyond them?

"That is what happens when we open the Bible – we enter the totally unfamiliar world of God, a world of creation and salvation stretching endlessly above and beyond us." (Peterson) It is exciting, enthralling, taxing, challenging, life-giving, life-affirming, transforming, faith-giving, faith-strengthening, life-shaping. Do you have a habit of reading the Bible? No? Why not take away some notes from the vestibule and try it for a week! Yes? Well, keep going! Here is the bigger question: will we let the Bible shape our views, shape our faith? Will the Bible shape our understanding of God, of Jesus, of ourselves? Will we let the Bible shape the way we behave? "Eat this book" – it will do us the world of good.