

Bennochy church 20th January 2019

I wasn't around in 1955. But I have got the song book somewhere in the house. My mother was there at the Kelvin hall in Glasgow. Maybe some of you, or someone you know of, was there that evening to hear Billy Graham. It was part of what was known as the *Tell Scotland* moment, led by Revd. Tom Allan, a minister in Glasgow, first at North Kelvinside church and then at the Tron. It was the beginning of the era of the great mass crusades, led by people like Billy Graham, at a time when the great preachers of the day, at least this is what I have been told, could attract large crowds and fill churches. It was a different era. Did you know that there is a Scottish preachers hall of fame? I am not sure how you get on it! I had a look, and no, my name is not there!

There have been key moments in history when great speeches have been made, and remembered. Lincoln's Gettysburg address during the American civil war, included these words, *"government of the people, by the people, for the people."* the Words of Martin Luther King, during the civil rights movement in America in the 1960's. He famously said, *"I have a dream today", " We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to*

know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!" That very night he was assassinated. The stirring words of Winston Churchill during the many crisis of WW2. *"Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few."* To the pilots of the battle of Britain in 1940. And John F Kennedy, *" ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."* You could add many others.

It was in the 4th century BC that the people of Israel returned out of exile from Babylon, it was now ruled by the Persians, they were allowed to leave, and return back to Jerusalem. This is the setting for the book of Nehemiah. There was a lot of work to be done. The first thing was to rebuild the city walls. Once that work had been done, the people asked Ezra the priest to read the book of the law. This is where we pick up the story in chapter eight. It must have been some book in length, as they all sat, men, women and children, from dawn to noon, and they all listened attentively. The book was the law of Moses, known as the Torah, to us, the first five books of the bible, from Genesis to Deuteronomy. When you get home have a look and see how long it is. They sat in the heat till noon, listening to the word of God.

This is story about how people responded to the word of God. Clearly it was an emotional day for many. But For the writer, the important point was this; for the people on hearing God's word, there was a recognition of how they had failed God. It is a story

that concludes in chapter 10, where a new agreement is made between God and his people.

In his home town of Nazareth, the reaction to Jesus, was very different. He to speaks the word of God, from the prophecy of Isaiah.

*"God's Spirit is on me;
he's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor,
Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and
recovery of sight to the blind,
To set the burdened and battered free,
to announce, "This is God's year to act!" (Luke 4: 18, the Message)*

Initially they are impressed; not bad for the son of a carpenter! many of them would have known Mary and Joseph. But they were not impressed with his interpretation. These people were Jewish to the core and he says to them, the good news of God , his liberty and freedom is not just for you.

"Liberty, equality, fraternity", words that would become the motto of the French republic, that came out of the French revolution of 1789. In the preamble to the declaration of independence, 1776, it says, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

For many these were dangerous words. Words of revolution. For those in the synagogue in Nazareth, they were words of theological revolt. They were incensed. We fail to grasp, understand and feel their anger. How dare he! They even tried to throw him off a cliff. Who says preaching is not a dangerous occupation! For many in the world, it still is!

As we hear the word of God, in the struggles, the ups and downs of life, its joys and its pain. How do we respond? That is what God is asking. Like the ancient people of God, there are times when we are trying to rebuild our lives. There is a lot of rubble lying about after some crisis that has overtaken us. Or we come Sunday by Sunday to hear God's word. And this is our synagogue. Whatever the context, what is our response? Are new agreements made with God. Moments of renewal. Or are their times when what we hear angers us, because it is not what we want to hear. Times when those deep down and tightly held beliefs are challenged.

In those moments, the most important this is this; our response must never be passive, as if it is just part of our routine. It is just what we do and it means nothing to us. The ancient people cried in remorse. The Jews got angry. What is our response to the words and the word of God? Amen.