

I'm very pleased to say that we've continued to settle in this week, our second week. I do only have one regret, and that is that I've yet to be able to swim in the ocean, but this is not for want of trying. On our second day here, I went down to Windansea, our closest beach. I've put my trunks on, took my towel down there. I did notice that the tide was rather high and that the waves were quite large, but nothing I thought that should stop an Englishman from having his constitutional. I did think it prudent to ask for some local advice.

I said to a man down there, "What's the best point to swim from this beach do you think?" He offered a very pithy and colloquial response, which I'll edit somewhat given that we're in church. The gist of it was you'd be a very certain kind of idiot to go swimming in that. I'll be trying again from a different beach this week.

However, I am very pleased to say that we did manage to go to Torrey Pines State Reserve which was wonderful. We had a great time there. I loved seeing those beautiful twisted trees that have been sculpted by the wind as the wind has battered them. It wasn't windy when we were there, but the amazing thing was that you could feel as if it was windy looking at the trees, because they were all facing, as I'm sure you're familiar, they're facing a certain direction because the wind has shaped them. They've been shaped by that strong coastal prevailing wind.

Shaping is a thing which comes through those three readings that we've heard read to us. I want to ask the question, "What is it that shapes us?" More particularly, I want to explore what it means to be shaped by the Words of the Bible.

Words can be very powerful and their power lies in the ability to share our understanding of ourselves and the world. Words can shape meaning and experience. Let me give you a very trivial example. It was my first flight, trans-Atlantic flight, to New York some years ago now. I was all prepared apart from the fact that nobody had ever told me about turbulence. That means that when we were halfway across the Atlantic and suddenly the plane dropped, what seemed to be miles, I just presumed we were crashing. My life flashed before me. As they say I went all sweaty and I gripped the hand of the man next to me rather fiercely. He leant over and said to me, "Don't worry, it's only turbulence." He went on to explain what was happening.

Now, if someone had told me this earlier, my whole experience of that plane journey would be different. It would have been changed from a sense of impending disaster to mild excitement. The word "turbulence" shaped my understanding of what was I was experiencing on that plane journey.

What identifies us as Christians is that we draw our key words and images and metaphors, those things which shape us, we draw them from the Bible. That's the scripture to which we look. That's where we look to have our understanding of ourselves and the world shaped. This is where the power and authority of the Biblical text lies.

Our readings give us a strong sense of how powerful that can be. In the Old Testament reading from Nehemiah, we see the profound effect that the reading of the Old Testament law had on the hearers of Ezra. They were all driven, en masse, the people were driven to weep tears of joy as they heard those words.

Something similarly powerful happens in the gospel reading for St. Luke. That's a great passage. Just let me set the scene for what's going on there so we get a sense of the power that's at play in that story. Jesus makes that reading the starting point of Jesus' ministry. In his gospel, it's straight after the temptation stories. Jesus goes straight there to his hometown of Nazareth and into the synagogue as was his custom. As a respected teacher, he was invited to read from the scriptures and he chose a well-known passage from the Book of Isaiah Chapter 61. He sat down after he read that. That didn't mean he'd finished, because in those days, whoever had read the scriptures was invited to share some words. Jesus hasn't finished when he sits down. The speaker was always going to speak while seated.

That's why we're told that all the eyes of those in the synagogue were fixed upon him. There's an intensity about this scene. We've all been in those situations where the room goes quiet. You wonder who's going to say something next. What are they going to say? That's what's happened in this story. To understand the intensity of the scene, we need to know something of the background of the words that have been read and we need to know what's not being said. Because we all communicate so much by what's left unsaid. Often, that's the real meaning. We need to know something of the background.

That's true of all cultures. That's why you can go to a different country, you might be able to understand the language, but you don't necessarily know all that's being communicated. My wife had a great example of this. It was a steep learning curve when she came to England. She bought a picture and she showed it to me and a friend. She asked as if we liked the picture, to which my friend said, "It's a nice frame." To which Laura replied, "I didn't ask about the frame. What do you think of the picture?" Well, of course, that made me squirm because I knew what was going on. My polite English friend clearly hated the picture, but because he didn't want to say anything to upset Laura, he was trying to find something positive to say. Laura didn't pick on that.

Anyway, going back to the gospel, what we realized in this gospel reading, even though it's not said in the passage, is that Jesus was talking about a claim to Messiahship. That passage that he'd read, the people understood where that came from. The people understood the significance of that passage. That passage was talking about a Messiah figure that they were looking for, a Messiah figure that was eagerly expected at that time. They knew what was at stake.

They'd heard about Jesus. They'd heard about his miracles. They knew he was causing a stir. They were looking at him intently thinking, "Is he going to say it? Is he going to say these words are about me? Is he going to say 'I'm the Messiah, the one you've been waiting for?'" That's why there's this electric moment in the synagogue. They knew, which isn't obvious from the passage, but they knew what was at stake, what was being communicated because of the significance of those Old Testament words.

There is this intent moment and Jesus breaks the silence by saying, "Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Everyone in the synagogue knew what that meant. Jesus was saying, "I am he. I am the Messiah. I am the one for whom you have been waiting." Jesus and his hearers knew what to expect in the Messiah because their understanding of who the Messiah was had been shaped by the words of the Old Testament. That was the clue.

The prophet Isaiah had offered these words and Jesus was picking up on them, because that was what had shaped his understanding of what the Messiah was going to do just as it had done for his hearers. He knew because of what he'd read in the Old Testament

scripture: that he was to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. There's so much more I could say about that, but I'm going to stay with this theme of shaping and say that just as Jesus' understanding of himself as the Messiah was shaped by the Old Testament scriptures, particularly the passages from Isaiah, so our understanding of who we are can be shaped by the scriptures.

We get a great example of that in the Epistle reading for today. That famous reading from 1 Corinthians is a defining image of the church. As we gather here this morning, how do we define ourselves? How do we understand ourselves? Are we a club, a charity, a business? No. We're to let this glorious image that St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, that image is to shape our understanding of ourselves. We're not a club, a charity or a business; we are the body of Christ. There can be no higher calling for any group of people. In some amazing mystical way, God by his Spirit binds us together into his body. As his body, we're called to carry out his mission of bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to blind, and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor. We're called to do that as Christ has nobody but our body; no hands, no feet, but ours. Together we are the body of Christ in this place, in this community.

St. James has a great tradition of mission and outreach and I detect a growing desire to continue in development. As the body regains health and strength, our ability to fulfill our mission will increase. St. Paul says, "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." That's a message for us as a community and also as individuals. Together, we are the body of Christ. Individually, we all have a part to play.

In the couple of weeks I've been here, I've already sat in on many committees and activities. There's a lot going on here. There are plenty of places to serve, many of ways to contribute to our mission. It's not all about simply being busy. Let our thinking be shaped by Paul's writings. Let's remember to understand ourselves as the body of Christ. Let that thought shape our thinking about our church and our place in it. Next time you're driving past Torrey Pines and you see all those twisted trees, think to yourself, "What shaped me?" Amen.