

# Homily for the Feast of Saint Cuthbert

*A homily preached at the Low Mass in the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, Pusey House, Oxford, on Wednesday, 20 March 2024 (The Feast of Saint Cuthbert) by Mr Timothy Powell, Chapel Intern, Pusey House*

**W**HAT does it mean to hear God's word? This is a question which is crucial to our understanding of our lives, both as Anglicans and as Christians. After all, the Book of Common Prayer – the authorised liturgy of the Church of England – reminds us at Morning and Evening Prayer that, along with thanksgiving, praise and supplication, 'to hear His most holy word' is one of the four actions that lay the foundation for everything else that forms part of our worship together as Anglicans. Jesus comes to the heart of the matter of why hearing God's word is so important to our life together as Christians in this evening's Gospel reading when He says: 'He that is of God heareth God's words.' We can only truly be God's people if we hear His word. How, then, do we go about hearing God's word so that we can rediscover what it means to be his people in this season of Lent?

Hearing God's word does not mean just standing there as the priest reads the Gospel, letting the words go in through one ear and out through the other as you think about what you are going to have for tea this evening or count the number of days until Father Mark returns from his sabbatical. (It's 25, if anyone is interested.) Instead, it is a task with which this Gospel passage challenges all of us to actively engage. It is by no means an easy task – and the Jews in this Gospel reading show us how not to succeed at it. They only listen to the word of God spoken by Jesus in so far as it confirms their belief that they are perfect, in so far as it supports their agenda of convincing everybody else that this is the case, and in so far as it makes them look good at the expense of those who know better. How many of us could honestly say that we have never been guilty of picking and choosing how we hear God's words, only listening to them when it suits us to do so?

As followers of Christ, this is not what we are asked to do; we are asked to hear what God would have us hear. This is by no means always what we want to hear. In this evening's Gospel reading, Jesus tells the Jews in no uncertain terms that they do not hear the Word of God, that they do not know God, and, to make matters worse, that they make themselves liars by saying they do both when, in fact, they do neither. Not exactly flattering. Yet God never puts such hard-hitting home truths before us to insult us, to hurt us, to make us feel as though we could never live up to what he asks of us. Rather, He puts them before us as a loving Father to call us to repentance amidst our endless internal monologues of pride and egoism, with which we try our hardest to convince ourselves that we are perfect, and to drown out the all-too-painful awareness that we constantly fall short by failing to hear God's word, failing to live according to it, or both.

If we heed this call to repentance, recognising that we have fallen far short of what God is asking of us, we recognise the truth that Jesus speaks in this evening's Gospel reading. We affirm that God is the only One who has perfect knowledge of what we need not only to survive, but to flourish. If we hear this and believe it, we recognise with Jesus

that God is the only One who has power to judge - and that his judgement is all that should matter to us, and, ultimately, all that does matter for us. As soon as we believe this, we are liberated from the fear of the words of others, which compels us to pretend to be something we are not in order to secure their acceptance of us. God knows exactly what we are now, loves us regardless, and empowers us to be transformed into exactly what He has created us to be by giving us His words to hear and keep. By hearing in God's word the good purposes that He wants to work in and through us, and by following the instructions that it gives us to allow Him to do so, we give God the honour that He deserves; and, if we do so, He will transform us into His people who reflect His glory - an honour beyond anything we can imagine.

And we need not despair of ever receiving these rewards of hearing and keeping God's word. He knows that we are capable of doing so, but He also knows our weakness that holds us back, and looks with compassion and mercy upon it. Time and again in the Scriptures, God's people ignore His word, or fail to keep it, or both; and time and again, He has mercy upon them and guides them in new ways to repent - to change their minds and fix them on hearing and keeping His word. And He still does this for us here and now: today, on the feast of Saint Cuthbert, and on the other feast days that the Church keeps, He gives us His saints to inspire us afresh to return to hearing and keeping His words. As an evangelist, Saint Cuthbert heard and kept God's commandment to go out into the world and preach the Gospel to every creature by travelling to the remotest reaches of the North to call his fellow men to repentance. As a hermit, he himself heard and kept God's call to repentance by leading a life of intense physical and spiritual discipline, crucifying his body to sin so that his soul might live for God alone. And as a bishop, he heard and kept God's word by loving his neighbour as himself, giving up the hermit's life which he would have much preferred to devote his final years to serving the people of his diocese.

However, the changing inspiration offered by the saints merely reflects the ultimate, unchanging means by which God enables us to hear His word and keep it: namely, Jesus Christ, the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us, who promises that: 'If a man keep my saying, he shall never see death'. In the Mass, during the Prayer of Consecration, we are called to hear the celebrant speak the Words of Institution spoken by Jesus at the Last Supper. We are called to believe their truth that the bread we see is also the Body of Christ, given for us, and that the wine we see is also the Blood of Christ, shed for us and for many for the remission of sins. And we are called to keep them by coming forward to receive with faith and thanksgiving. Every time we receive the Body of Christ, our bodies broken by our failure to hear and keep the Word of God are renewed to become ever more like the perfect tabernacle of the Body of Christ. And every time we receive the Blood of Christ, our Great High Priest himself enters into our tabernacles once more, sprinkling and cleansing our souls with it. His Blood purges us from the dead works of the Old Law, which are the opposite of what it means to hear and keep the Word of God. Through it, He has redeemed us and set us free for ever to live in love and charity with our neighbours, united in our common purpose of loving and serving our living God in this world. And, in the world to come, it will enable us to follow Him into our inheritance of eternal life in the heavenly city, where we shall never see death, but evermore dwell with Him: to whom with the Father and the Holy Ghost be all honour and glory, world without end. AMEN.