

ARE YOU OPEN-MINDED OR EMPTY-MINDED?

Today's Text: Jeremiah Chap. 35

Extracts:

The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, saying, "Go to the house of the Rechabites, speak to them, and bring them into the house of the Lord, into one of the chambers, and give them wine to drink." ... Then I set before (them) bowls full of wine, and cups; and I said to them, "Drink wine." But they said, "We will drink no wine, for Jonadab the son of Rechab, our father, commanded us, saying, 'You shall drink no wine, you nor your sons, forever.'" ... Then came the word of the Lord to Jeremiah, saying, "Go and tell the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, 'The words of Jonadab... which he commanded his sons, not to drink wine, are performed; ... but although I have spoken to you, ... you did not obey Me'" [Jer. 35: 1-2, 5-6, 12-14]

On Monday, 2 October 2006, a one-room class house owned by an Amish community in Paradise, Pennsylvania, USA, was attacked by a gun man, Charles Carl Roberts, IV.¹ That unprovoked and deadly attack has drawn the world's attention to a group of people that has chosen to shun modern things. The Amish are descendants of Swiss Anabaptists who live in rural settlements in 22 US states and one in Canada. Apart from English, they speak a German dialect. They refuse military service, do not draw Social Security nor accept government assistance. They shun modern gadgets, such as electricity and the telephone, preferring horse-drawn carriages and gas lanterns and lamps.

Ordinarily, we are tempted to regard the Amish people as closed-minded, that is, they have refused to adapt to change and modernity. However, since they claim to base their practices on their Christian faith, there is much more to their way of life than meets the eye. Is closed-mindedness the opposite of open-mindedness? What does it really mean to be open-minded? Is it possible that we have equated open-mindedness with being empty-minded, that is, embracing inferior values for change sake? Why is it that we are only open-minded to worldly ways but empty-minded in obeying God? These and more are the issues that we shall examine in today's lesson.

¹ Based on the following sources: 'Amish grandfather: "We must not think evil of this man,"' www.cnn.com/2006/US/10/04/amish.shooting/index.html and 'Insider's guide: Who are the Amish?' www.cnn.com/2006/US/10/03/tbr.amish/index.html

1. Background: the poser

In today's Bible text, God asked the prophet Jeremiah to invite the Rechabites into one of the chambers in the house of the Lord and serve them wine to drink. The Rechabites refused to drink, saying [**Jer. 35: 6-11**]:

We will drink no wine, for Jonadab the son of Rechab, our father, commanded us, saying, 'You shall drink no wine, you nor your sons, forever. You shall not build a house, sow seed, plant a vineyard, nor have any of these; but all your days you shall dwell in tents, that you may live many days in the land where you are sojourners.' Thus we have obeyed the voice of Jonadab... in all that he charged us, to drink no wine all our days, ... nor build ourselves houses to dwell in; nor do we have vineyard, field or seed. But we have dwelt in tents, and have obeyed and done according to all that Jonadab our father commanded us.

The Rechabites were commanded by their forefathers never to drink wine nor live a settled life. When Jeremiah tempted them with breaking the first one (drinking wine), they refused to fall. However, when Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, attacked the kingdom of Judah, the Rechabites said to one another, "Come, let us go to Jerusalem for fear of the army of the Chaldeans (and of) the Syrians." Consequently, they had become city-dwellers, no longer nomads [**v. 11**].

That is interesting! When it came to drinking, they were closed-minded; but when it came to place of residence, they were open-minded. Their reasons are also interesting. They refused to drink because they claimed to be obeying the command of their forefathers. However, when it came to changing residence from tents to city homes, they based their change of mind on fear of the Babylonian and Syrian armies. We need to explain this seeming inconsistency!

2. Open-mindedness: let's think out of the box!

We hear so many labels being put on people on the basis of their positions on controversial issues. A person who holds on to traditional or religious views is generally labeled a 'conservative.' On the other hand, a person who stands or lives by a current or popular position is labeled 'progressive' or 'liberal.' By inference, a conservative person is said to be closed-minded while those who have accepted the current or popular view are said to be open-minded. But how do we classify the Rechabites who were 'conservative' on wine but 'progressive' on residence?

Change can be good or bad, depending on its impact on our deeply-held values. *Within the context of true faith, it is to be expected that believers can accept change if and only if it upholds or supports God's truth.* Within that framework, we can classify people into several clusters, such as the following:

a) *The Empty Drum or Rolling Stone*

Popular clichés say that “an empty drum makes the loudest noise,” and “a rolling stone gathers no moss.” An empty drum is as loud as you beat it. When you stop, the noise stops. The rolling stone never stops rolling. As it goes, it gathers moss and, of course, bruises! Therefore, the empty drum or rolling stone is the person who loves to go with every new idea or position, even when it contradicts the word of God. Such a person desires to be politically correct at all times. S(he) is likely to support abortion but condemn murder. S(he) will support same-sex marriage but strongly condemn those who are opposed to child adoption by gay couples. So, an empty drum or rolling stone is a classical example of a person who is *empty-minded!*

Let us take a few examples around us. A wife who accepts or agrees with everything her husband does or says for fear of losing him will ultimately lose him because she can *never* satisfy him. An employee who does everything his boss asks him to do will wind up in jail because he will also condone illegal practices. A politician who wants to remain popular by basing his/her positions on the latest opinion poll has no opinion at all and will sooner than later lose elections because opinions change as rapidly as the weather! A pastor who fails to condemn immorality or to correct erring members for fear of losing fat tithes will ultimately have an empty church.

b) *The Dinosaur*

The dinosaur has become extinct because it *refused* to adapt to climatic changes perhaps because it was the most powerful creature in its time. We shall use that analogy to describe a person who holds tenaciously to traditional or cultural (or any other) values when s(he) is confronted with the truth of God’s word. In other words, such a person has been confronted with *superior knowledge* but has refused perhaps out of pride or culpable ignorance to accept it. That is the *closed-minded* person. Jesus aptly described that kind of person in the following words [**Jn 3: 16-18**]:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life [truth of God]...He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe[rejects that truth] is condemned already

A good number of Christians today have stuck to the traditions of their denominations with respect to church attendance and rituals but their hearts are far from God. Some religions which claim to believe in God

reject that he has a Son. Yet, whoever hates Jesus hates His Father also [Jn 15: 23]. Since it is a *conscious choice*, the dinosaur is empty-minded!

c) *The Rolls-Royce*

The Rolls-Royce is a British-made car that becomes more valuable with age! It is like a good marriage. It is like a winning ticket. Who will like to lose such pearls of value? This analogy has been used to describe a person who rejects changes or popular views that contradict or undermine the word of God. The person has compared what s(he) has with what is being offered and comes to the *informed* conclusion to hold on to the 'past.' The world will brand such a person conservative or closed-minded. However, s(he) is quite open-minded in the sense that his/her position has been reinforced by new knowledge that confirms that what s(he) is being offered is inferior to what s(he) already has. It is like a 50 year-old man who resisted the temptation to divorce his 45 year-old wife and marry a 26 year-old beauty. He based his decision on a critical evaluation of the two women and came to the conclusion that he could not replace a jewel with a gold-digger! He was open-minded enough to assess his situation and stick to a superior choice.

Joshua put it quite eloquently when he confronted the children of Israel soon after they had entered and taken over the Promised Land. The people had earlier committed to worshipping the true God revealed to them through Moses on Mount Sinai. On arrival in the Promised Land, they came face-to-face with the liberal (immoral) way of life of the conquered pagans. He posed the issue as follows [Josh. 24: 15] :

If it seems evil to you to serve the Lord [the true way], choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River [Nile], or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell [the inferior way]. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

Clearly, Joshua was hardly conservative. He had evaluated the options before him and decided to reject the popular culture but *stay with the truth*. Therefore, he was open-minded.

d) *The convert*

The convert is the person who has accepted a new way and rejected the one that s(he) was used to because the new way supports or derives from the truth of God. That is why those who give up idol worship to accept Christ are called converts. To become a convert, you must be open-minded to receive and accept superior knowledge. For example, Saul was on the way to Damascus “breathing threats and murder against the

disciples of the Lord.” He was armed with the authority of the Jewish leaders to bring bound to Jerusalem the followers of Christ. However, on the way, the risen Christ manifested Himself by way of a bright light from heaven and a voice, which left Saul terrified and blind. His first utterance thereafter suggests a change of mind for Saul (Paul) asked, “Lord, what do You want me to do?” [Acts 9: 1-6]. He did more for Christ and the Christian faith than even the disciples who had walked with Christ during His earthly ministry. He was open-minded.

The Rechabites refused Jeremiah’s offer to drink wine and upheld their forefather’s command (the Rolls-Royce) but moved into Jerusalem when their nomadic way of life was no longer feasible, especially as the change was consistent with God’s message to Judah through Jeremiah to accept Babylonian rule (the convert). Therefore, they had demonstrated open-mindedness in both cases. That was why God used them as a benchmark for obedience when He told them through Jeremiah, “Because you have obeyed the commandments of Jonadab your father, and kept *all* his precepts and done according to *all* that he commanded you, therefore, ... Jonadab shall not lack a man to stand before Me forever” [Jer. 35: 18-19]. *You are open-minded if you give up sin and wickedness and give your life to Christ [the convert] and remain steadfast to total obedience to God thereafter [the Rolls-Royce].* You are empty-minded if you are confronted with the truth but still choose to hold on to falsehood [the dinosaur] [see Rom. 1: 19-32]. You are empty-minded if you keep changing your mind in favour of new ways and values even or especially when they contradict the truth of God (the empty drum or rolling stone).

3. Becoming open-minded

In summarizing how Judah and Jerusalem had disobeyed Him, God told Jeremiah, “I have **spoken** to them but they have *not heard*, and I have **called** them but they have *not answered*” [Jer. 35: 17]. To hear, you have to listen. To answer, you have to understand. So, when you refuse to listen to God’s word, you are empty-minded. When you refuse His call, it is either you do not understand it or you have refused. Instead, you have preferred the way of the world which can only deliver tribulation [Jn 16: 33]. You are empty-minded.

You may ask, “How and when did God speak to me and what has He called me to do?” The word of God says, “God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son” [Heb. 1: 1,2]. The word of God spoken through the prophets “at various times and in various ways” is found in the Old Testament of the Bible (from Genesis to Malachi). Jesus confirmed that in the story of the Rich man and Lazarus [Lk 16: 19-31]. The rich man who was in the place of torment after death pleaded with Abraham to send somebody from the dead to go and warn his father’s house to change their wicked ways, but Abraham told him, “If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from

the dead.” In like manner, what God spoke to us “in these last days” through His Son forms the New Testament (from Matthew to Revelation). Therefore, God has spoken to us *already*. When you obey what God has spoken through His word as recorded in the Scriptures, you are open-minded.

What does this obedience entail? The Preacher says that the whole duty of man on earth is to fear God and keep His commandments [**Ecc. 12: 13**]. That is because God created man for Himself to declare His praise [**Is. 43: 21**] and for His pleasure [**Rev. 4: 11**]. Therefore, we did not come to the earth to build houses, businesses and successful careers but to do God’s will for “he who does the will of God abides forever” [**1 Jn 2: 17**]. God has given us talents and wealth to enable us to do His work *when* He calls us [**Deut. 8: 17-18**].

The work of God includes the Great Commission to spread His word to all the corners of the earth [**Matt. 28: 18- 20**]. Your call may not necessarily be a worldwide evangelistic ministry. It can be your relationship with your nearest neighbour or what you are doing with the talents that God has given you. Whether at home or school, at work or place of worship, you may be the only Bible that some people will ever read [**cf: 2 Cor. 3: 2,3**]. If your fruits do not speak for Christ, you have not answered His call!. You are empty-minded.

4. Conclusion: be open-minded to Christ

Those who do God’s commandments are blessed “that they may have the *right* to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city,” the eternal Jerusalem [**Rev. 22: 14**]. That city has no temple “for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple” [**Rev. 21: 22**]. Since no human being has seen God, He has been revealed to us in human form by His only begotten Son, Jesus the Christ [**Jn 1: 18, Jn 14: 7-9**]. He is the only way to His Father [**Jn 14: 6**]. Certainly, it is not easy to accept that truth of God and you cannot do it by reasoning or will power. Happily, God has given us the Holy Spirit for “no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit” [**1 Cor. 12: 3**].

Grab your chance before it is too late!. Be close-minded to the world. Be open-minded to Christ .