

ORDINARY SUNDAY 3: January 24<sup>th</sup>  
Nehemiah 8:2-10; Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21

Notes Nehemiah:

- ❖ The book of Nehemiah covers the period of Israel's history from the time the people return to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon (538-400 B.C).
- ❖ The earliest Hebrew and Greek manuscripts treated the books of Ezra and Nehemiah as a single book. They were split when Jerome translated the Bible into Latin.
- ❖ In the original Hebrew text, Ezra-Nehemiah formed part of a much larger historical work that began with 1&2 Chronicles. This large history was possibly written by a single hand often referred to as "The Chronicler".
- ❖ The Chronicler's work represents a reinterpretation of Israel's history and he rewrites it from an understanding of Israel as a worshipping community of faith. Israel was to be a priestly people, a holy nation, a people whose whole life was meant to be lived out in praise of God.
- ❖ This worshipping community had at its centre the Temple in Jerusalem where the priests and more especially the Levites had a dominating role and were considered to be indispensable for the life of the nation.

The Jews were carried off into exile in Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 and they remained there until Cyrus the Persian king crushed Babylon and set the exiles free. Whilst in Babylon they did a great deal of soul searching in an attempt to try and understand why it was that God's chosen people should be so sorely crushed and why they had to be driven from the land and once again be forced to live as slaves in a foreign country under foreign gods. Why do God's people have to suffer so badly?

In the theology of the Chronicler, God's blessing was on David and the dynasty that sprang from his line. When we read through his history we find that there is no mention of the anointing of Saul, it was as if David was the only legitimate king. This was his way of saying that God was in control of things and they would ignore God to their peril. They had to accept David as king, not because David was wonderful but because David was chosen. And so the northern kingdom was destroyed by the Assyrians and this is presented as being a result of the people's unwillingness to work together with the southern kingdom based around Jerusalem and under the King chosen by God. They wanted to worship according to their own likes, customs and cultures, to be separate and to have a king of their own. This was, for the Chronicler a sin and it brought down upon them the judgment of God. He wanted a single people he could call his own and was not willing to tolerate people wanting to modify and change his will.

The Southern Kingdom endured a similar fate. Their sin was that they forgot what God had done for them and wanted to live their lives according to the ways of the nations around them instead of living according to the Law of God. They became arrogant, corrupt and self serving and so the judgment of God crushed them. The magnificent temple and city was destroyed and the priests and people were taken off into exile. It was clear that the sufferings they endured was a result of these sins. They brought it on themselves.

What we see in today's story is what happens when the people return to their land. We have to remember that the Babylonians had destroyed everything and that the land was a desolate waste. Pagans had been brought in to replace the Hebrews and neglect, suffering and hardship was everywhere. Our story begins as we see how the people, after being set free by Cyrus returned to the land of Israel and immediately set up an altar and offered a sacrifice to God. Their first step to recovery was to be God. Sacrifice became the key identifying mark of Israel which is why so much of the book is about the rebuilding of the temple. They are the people of God because they worship him in sacrifice.

The other great movement we see in the Book is that of ridding the nation of the pagans who come into the land replacing the Jews who had been led off to exile. The legend has it that Ezra came back from exile carrying a copy of the Law of Moses in his hand and he initiated a spiritual renewal and reform that was meant to help make the people a holy people dedicated to God. This is what we find in today's reading. Ezra reads from the Book of the Law. He wants the people to understand that they are spiritual people, a people who are called and shaped by the Word of God. If God is taken out of what they each day, then they will again be doomed to destruction. In reading the Law, Ezra is defining who they are. They were no longer a nation like the other nations. They were now a faith community, a religious community, a people who could only be understood in terms of what God commanded them.

This is a most significant point for it marks a clear change in Israel's self-understanding. Until this point the people presumed that they could live in the land and enjoy the blessings of being Hebrews simply because they were Jews. They accepted it as a part of their birth right. They were born to be Jews and everything else flowed on from that. What Ezra and Nehemiah are telling them is that to be the People of God, to be true Israelites, they had to live under the law of God. All that they did had to be now defined according to the wishes of God and if they ignored God, if they watered down his demands, if they lived in the ways of the peoples of other nations, then once again they would be driven from the land God had given them.

#### **Notes: Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21**

- ❖ 1:1-4 serves as a prologue to the Gospel and Luke indicates that what has taken place among them has all been under the directing hand of God.
- ❖ These things have happened "among us" which includes the Church of the Acts of the Apostles. What was happening to the early Christian community was still very much a part of the plan of God.
- ❖ For Luke the historian, it is important to set out that what follows has been put together by those who were eyewitness to the events.
- ❖ The Prologue indicates that Luke's writing was not meant simply for the Christian community but was a means of engaging with the wider world – it was published with the financial and political backing of Theophilus.
- ❖ For Luke the Gospel is history – that is, it is true and so can be trusted. This is important for Luke's Church. They had seen the chosen people of God once again destroyed (by the Roman armies who sacked the city and destroyed the city and the Temple). It would seem that God had abandoned his chosen ones and if he abandoned the Jews how could the Gentiles be sure that he would not do the same thing to them. Luke writes to show how the mission to the Gentiles (as seen in Acts) was all a part of the plan of God from the beginning.
- ❖ 4:14 shows a key Lucan theme; what happens with Jesus and the Church happens under the power and direction of the Holy Spirit of God.
- ❖ Jesus is shown as being a teacher, a ministry that has a key place in all gospels.
- ❖ Jesus goes to the synagogue and is thus shown to be a pious Jew. These synagogues were, by the time of Jesus scattered around Palestine and were centres of worship, gathering, study and prayer.
- ❖ Jesus quotes Isaiah – with some minor changes reading from a scroll which was the common form for keeping the biblical texts before books (codex) were used.
- ❖ In anointing Jesus Luke has him taking on the role of Messiah (Christ), a term that means the anointed one.
- ❖ Jesus is anointed, called, chosen and sent by God, all actions that will characterize ministry in the Acts and the early Church.
- ❖ He was sent to the marginalized, those who had no freedom, those who were in need.

What we have in today's Gospel reading is a picture of Jesus as a prophetic messiah, one who is anointed and commissioned by God for a specific ministry. In quoting Isaiah, Luke brings to the people's minds the great servant songs and presents Jesus as the fulfilment of those prophecies. Jesus is a prophet in the same line as Elijah, Elisha, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah. His task then, like those great men, was not simply to bolster up the existing institutions of the land and to tell the King and the people what they wanted to hear. His task, as was their task, will be to call the people to repent, to challenge the men and women of faith, to forgive, to heal and to discipline.

But for Luke here He is a prophet whose task it is to bring good news to the poor, the blind, the prisoners and those who are oppressed. This is a key part of the opening picture we have of Jesus. For many at that time, the messiah would be one who would come along and drive out all of their enemies, sort out their problems and restore the good life to what it was when they had their own king on their throne. But this is not what God had in mind. Taking up the kind of message that Ezra proclaimed Jesus preached that God was not interested in more sacrifices, was not measuring a person by how few laws he or she might have broken or by how much money they offered in the temple. A person would be measured now only in terms of how Christ like they became. That is the only rule and measure.

Jesus in Luke demands that people turn away from lives that were built up around personal wants, personal expectations and personal comforts. They were to live as God wanted and what God wanted was going to be most eloquently proclaimed later on when we see Jesus nailed to the cross. The whole of the message of the Kingdom is about repenting, about dying, about reaching out beyond ourselves to meet the demands of God and the needs of our brothers and sisters.

This is why that list of people to whom Jesus says he is sent is so important. He is here for the poor, the blind, the prisoners and those who are oppressed. These are all people who have no control over their lives. They are at the mercy of others. While we cannot totally spiritualize these people they do represent each and every one of us at some level of our lives. Jesus actually wants us to go out to show love and charity to these people. The poor among us must be our priority, they must be the reason we come together to form faith communities and our parishes will remain lifeless unless they have a central place in our thoughts and actions. But Jesus in Luke is saying a lot more than that.

He is also pointing out that each and every one of us is in some ways, in some areas of our lives is poor, blind, a prisoner and being oppressed. That is, we are sinners. We do not always see God calling us to act in what we are doing each day. We do not always see him in the person with whom we are dealing and certainly not in those with whom we are struggling: yet he is in them. We do not always think of ourselves as being spiritually poor, as being in need of guidance. All too often we think we are doing alright and can go days without turning to offer our work and our life to God, without pausing to ask forgiveness. We are rich in our own self confidence and self reliance and such people do not think they have an urgent need of God in their lives.

It is also true that we can become prisoners to all kinds of things. We see it when we are going into battle against someone or are running an agenda with a group against someone or some project. We can become prisoners to these things to the point where love, charity and the Gospel end up pushed to the side. We can become prisoners to all kinds of weaknesses, personality traits, sins and ambitions. We might think we are free but if we were to pause in the Holy Spirit we would find we are anything but free and need God's healing grace.

Finally, the same can be said of being oppressed. This comes about when we struggle to live as people of hope. The situation in which we find ourselves can seem to be so dark, so large, so overpowering that we feel crushed by it. We fail to see a way forward and the temptation

is to sit back and wait for the whole thing to fall on our heads or fall apart around us. We feel that we are unable to move forward and to resolve our difficulties.

These are all the kinds of messages that will come back time and time again throughout the Gospel. But they are in some ways a continuation of the theme that is proclaimed by Ezra and Nehemiah: God's people must live according to God's laws. Christians must live Christ like lives. It is the same message only this time we have something Ezra and the people of his time did not have. We have Jesus Christ, the Son of God who lived, died and rose again on the third day for our salvation. Ezra encouraged the people to offer sacrifice as a way of living godly lives but that could only take them so far. Jesus tells us that we can live godly lives only by living in him. It is the grace and power of God, alive to us through the Holy Spirit that can enable us to live Christ-like lives. It is only then that we will be able to see, will be rich in grace and power, will be set free from what holds us down and will not fear what comes into our lives for we know we are saved.

As we move into the Gospel we have our eyes now firmly fixed on the prophet Jesus who is the anointed Messiah. Our call is to adjust our lives so that they become more like his. What he does, we are called to do. The way he lives is the way we are called to live and the people to whom he reaches out are to be considered our brothers and sisters. Then and only then can we bear the name Disciple of Jesus Christ. Then and only then will we see our parish community blossom and grow.