

Reflection 30 January 2022

Today's readings are all a great encouragement to those who preach.

In Nehemiah, the people are restored by the reading and explaining of God's law. In the gospel passage, Jesus reads and preaches in the synagogue, proclaiming good news. Today's readings are a reminder of the burden of that task, but also a great encouragement as to the power of preaching in revealing God, proclaiming a new age and restoring God's people; and a reassurance that we do not do this alone, but in the power of the Spirit.

The reading from Nehemiah is from the 5th Century BC and refers to the time when the Jews had returned to their homeland from exile in Babylon. When Nehemiah heard of the difficulties they were facing, particularly in rebuilding the walls and gates of Jerusalem, he got the Emperor's permission to travel to Jerusalem and oversee its restoration. This was not without opposition or difficulties: some political powers resisted the reestablishment of Jerusalem, and Nehemiah uncovered corruption within his own community as the rich exploited the poor.

This passage records the day when, after the completion of the restoration of Jerusalem's walls, the people gather to hear the words of the Law read for the first time since their return. The physical restoration of Jerusalem stands as a symbol of and prelude to the spiritual restoration of its people, which will arise from a renewed relationship with God. The passage recounts four movements within the gathering:

1. The public reading of the Law (v.3) – this was an event for the whole community.
2. Worship (v.6) – the people have several reasons to bring praise to God: the return from exile, the restoration of Jerusalem, the gathering to hear the Law, and the Law itself as a gift of God.
3. Explanation/teaching (v.8) – the Law is translated and explained to the people from early morning until midday - don't worry this service will not take that long!
4. Celebration (vs.9-12) – confronted with the requirements of the Law, the people are moved to tears but, encouraged by Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites, they turn to celebration "because they understood what had been read to them".

The passage from Luke follows on from Jesus being tempted in the desert and is Luke's first account of His public ministry. Apart from as a boy in the Temple, these are the first public words of Jesus recorded by Luke.

It is significant, then, that this first account of Jesus' public ministry takes place in the synagogue, the centre of religious life – Luke tells us it was "usual" for Jesus to go there on the Sabbath. The synagogue was a place for teaching (sacrifices were carried out only in the Temple), and members of the assembled company would be called to read and explain the Scriptures.

Jesus reads from Isaiah 61, a servant song. When He had finished reading He sat down – an indication that He was about to begin teaching, as rabbis taught from a seated position. The message of Jesus is as short as it is shocking: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (v21, NRSV). In claiming the fulfilment of this passage from Isaiah, Jesus makes this His 'mission statement' or 'manifesto' at the outset of His public ministry. The language of the 'poor', 'captives',

'blind' and 'oppressed' would resonate with the story of Israel's history, particularly the Israelites in exile. Jesus' statement is therefore an announcement of the coming of one who will return God's people from exile, who will open up God's ways of freedom and justice. This is the frame story through which Luke sees the ministry of Jesus: Jesus has come to restore God's broken people. The rest of Luke's story is about how Jesus fulfils this task.

What Jesus announces is, in a very real sense, gospel – good news. The story of God's relationship with God's people has always had a 'gospel movement': from bondage to liberation, from exile to return, from destruction to restoration, and here Jesus outlines that same gospel movement as His core purpose: from poverty to wholeness, from captivity to liberation, from blindness to sight, from oppression to freedom.

What makes all of this possible? That, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me..." (v.18). It is the Spirit of God that blows this wind of freedom, filling God's servant with the power to fulfil His task.

One theme running through these readings is the restoration of God's people. In Nehemiah there is a physical restoration of Jerusalem and a spiritual restoration as the people hear again God's law. In Luke, Jesus proclaims that He is the fulfilment of Isaiah's words on restoration for the poor, captives, blind and oppressed, only when each and every part of the body is restored can the whole body be complete.

Where is God's restoration needed today? What situations are you aware of in our own community where "good news" is needed? These are very important questions. We may not have been in exile like the Israelites, we don't perhaps experience the same oppression that Jesus refers to in the Gospel of Luke. We are, however, all people of this world and of these times. Our struggles may be different but the work of God continues. We're a month out now from Christmas, but the work of Christmas, and therefore the work of Christ, now needs to start.

It's fairly obvious that our own lives have changed dramatically over the last two years. What we thought of as our normal lives have changed, we have all suffered loss, we have all experienced the effects of separation. We need to rebuild. Rebuild our lives, our relationships, and our spirituality. Rather like the Israelites we need to restore the things that are lost to our society, and like Jesus we need to identify those who need that help the most. Above all these passages today encourage us to build back, but build back fairer. The pandemic has highlighted some great inequalities in society, in our nation and in our local communities. Jesus' mission - his task if we can call it that - is to be a servant to all, and in particular the poor, the captives, the oppressed. Wherever Christians are, that's where God is and where God should be. God, however, is everywhere even in, and especially in those places where the spirit may seem absent - and sometimes it's us that brings God's spirit to those places.

I've seen first hand some of the work that goes on in the Great Western Hospital on the clinical wards. There a rich variety of people from different countries, different races, different creeds - the secular, the scientist, the faithful all work together to care for those in need in the most difficult and high pressured circumstances. Here we see bodies restored, health improved, or where it is needed, comfort given to those who need it most.

We will need to be anchored in constant, flexible values and our deep faith in the Lord. We have faced turmoil before and come out of it stronger – and by the grace of God, we'll do it again – but it cannot happen by accident.

God calls for a holy Church and a prophetic voice so that there may be the proclamation of the gospel, the good news, of Jesus and the turning of many to his saving love. Not to choose this chance of renewal is to choose the old ways. Above all, look for signs of God at work in the world and get stuck in.

There are hints of hope everywhere, signals of God's love for us. If people are there – where God is – restoring relationships, assuring love and working towards justice, mercy and peace, we might rebuild a post-Covid world that looks more like the kingdom of heaven. In doing this we will restore our personal Jerusalems, and be a servant to all like our teacher Jesus.

AMEN