

23 January 2022

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Luke 4:14-21

“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

The scriptures, the various holy writings that now make up our Bible, feature in both our Old Testament and Gospel readings today. And in both cases, the fulfilment of the scripture takes place in the people’s hearing.

The Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar overthrew Judea and its capital, Jerusalem, in the 6th century BC. They destroyed the magnificent temple built by Solomon four hundred years earlier; they burned down the city’s gates and public buildings, and demolished the city’s strong walls to ensure that the remaining inhabitants could not re-establish it as a fortress and potential seat of rebellion. The leading citizens and those with wealth were taken captive and led off to exile in Babylon; only the poorest of Jerusalem’s inhabitants were left behind.

By the time of Nehemiah, the Babylonians had been overthrown by the Persians. Many of the exiles have then returned to Judah, and in Jerusalem the temple has been rebuilt. But decades further on much of Jerusalem still lies in ruins and, without its walls, it remains vulnerable. It seems that there is a general malaise among the people.

Nehemiah, one of the many Jews who had lived in exile, by now finds himself holding the role of cupbearer to Persian king Artaxerxes. This role was more important than it sounds, giving Nehemiah something of the status of trusted confidant. When visitors from Judah arrive, Nehemiah comes to learn of the state of his homeland. This causes him a great sense of shame, and he is moved to prayer. In his prayer he acknowledges that his people deserved what had befallen them, and he includes himself among those who have sinned against God and forgotten the law of Moses.

Expressing his grief for his homeland to King Artaxerxes, he ends up getting permission from the king to return to Jerusalem and rebuild it.

In the months that follow his return, under his governorship, the city is rebuilt and its defences re-established. But, as Bible scholar Raymond Brown notes in his commentary,

...Nehemiah's ambition was not simply to reconstruct the city's defences but to revitalise a spiritual community. Writing in the same century as Nehemiah, the Greek historian Thucydides made the point that it is the people not the walls that make a city. The spiritual, moral and social contribution of committed men and women is of greater importance than strong bulwarks, but Jerusalem's governor soon discovered that reforming a community is a more exacting task than restoring its walls. He believed that the people living within the newly fortified city and their neighbours in the surrounding towns and villages had a right to spiritual prosperity as well as physical security.¹

Or, as Jane Williams puts it, rebuilding Jerusalem is "the easy bit. The next task is to rebuild a people fit to live in Jerusalem and be God's covenant people."²

This, then, is the context for today's reading from Nehemiah 8.

Ezra, a priest and teacher of the law, stands before the people and reads from the Scriptures, from the book of the Law of Moses.

It is emphasised that it is read "in the presence of the men and women and all who had understanding", and that "all the people listened attentively".

As we look at this event, we might say, with Jesus, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

But who are these hearers? They are a very mixed bag. Remember that the exile took away the leading citizens, the wealthy, those with status. Those who were left behind were not leaders, wealthy, having status. They could be thought of as those who didn't matter.

Then too the hearers include those who have seen fit to return from exile, for

¹ Brown, *Nehemiah*, p.127

² Williams, *Lectioary Reflections*, p.26

whatever reason. Some of them would have done well in the decades of exile; some would not. Some would have continued to be faithful to God – as faithful as they could be in the strange circumstances of exile in a land with its own gods and goddesses and religious practices. Others would not have been faithful, having forgotten perhaps even basic things about their God. Some have taken wives and had families of other nations and religions, and their loyalties are divided.³

These are the hearers. And they need to be re-formed as the people of God; this disparate collection of people need to learn to live together as a society obedient to the rule of God.

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The fulfilment of the teaching of the scripture – the law of Moses, the foundational document of this people – comes as the people hear and respond.

There is weeping. Is it with a nostalgic longing for the past, the great days of Moses? Is it with shame because they have forgotten so much of what they now hear, and have failed to keep the holy laws of God? Whatever it is, they are told to turn instead to joy – feeding the poor, and worshipping God.⁴

Scripture has creative power in the life of the community of faith; and the context of a particular community of faith always creates something fresh in the interpretation and application of scripture.

It is not for nothing that we include the public reading of the Bible in our worship today. One writer has remarked, when Scripture is read, interpreted, and an audience listens with the anticipation that something meaningful will be said, together “they create the potential for a sacramental moment in which the Spirit of God breaks into the now and brings with it a little piece of God’s preferred future.”⁵

For the scripture to be fulfilled, it needs to be received, and that requires an openness of heart. When we read the Bible, it should be with an attitude in which we allow the Bible to, in a sense, *read us*. We come to it as a people willing to be

³ Williams, *Lectionary Reflections*, p.26

⁴ Williams, *Lectionary Reflections* p.27

⁵ Jacobson.

transformed by what we read and hear; we come to it as people willing to repent where it becomes apparent we have failed.

This seems to have been the disposition of the people of Jerusalem in Nehemiah's time, hearing a text that reminds them of how far short they had fallen of God's standards, a message of failure that was interpreted to explain how they had come to be in their unfortunate state, a text that taught them the way to be the distinctive people of God so that they could be a light to the nations.

When Jesus read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah in his home town of Nazareth and declared "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" the response of the people proved to be quite different to those of Jerusalem's citizens in the time of Nehemiah – which is something we'll read about next week. What I will mention now, though, is that it becomes clear that Jesus' hometown audience demonstrate that they are not open to the scripture: in the matters on which Jesus teaches, they don't want scripture to transform them and their understanding of God's purposes at work among them.

It is easy for us to focus on the verses in the Bible that justify our actions, support our cause, give us an argument against those who oppose us ..., and to fail to heed the verses that call us to become better than we are, the verses that shape us to be a *people*, a community calling into being for a shared purpose in the world.

It is easy for us to be tempted to make excuses for verses and concepts that seem too hard, too demanding, too much of a deviation from the habits and practices we are inculturated to see as normal.

We find examples of this in relation to the response we in our day might make to some of the ideas in the verses Jesus quotes from Isaiah.

He says he has been anointed to proclaim "good news to the poor". And to those who live comfortable lives and do not want to give up what they have, this might be confronting: it might feel like a time to stop listening.

But for many others of us it is all too easy to try to limit the scope of what Jesus quotes. We need to recognise that the "poor" are "not only the economically

impoverished but all those who are marginal or excluded from human fellowship, the outcast”⁶, due to any one of the factors that lowered one’s status in the world of the time – “factors such as gender, genealogy, education, occupation, sickness, disability, and degree of religious purity”.⁷

The “year of the Lord’s favour” is generally thought to refer to the Leviticus concept of the Jubilee, by which every 50 years people were to be released from their debts and land restored to its original owners. And it is easy for us to want to bracket this out completely, because it appears that it was never actually practised within Judaism, and, more especially, because it is thought unworkable in modern capitalist society.

Rather than bracketing it out however, we do well to reflect on the challenge and rebuke that this concept gives to notions of individualism, the accumulation of greater and greater wealth (truly *obscene* wealth), and all at the expense of those who go without so that those with too much already can have more.

And because we so easily bracket it out, we can too easily miss Jesus’ own metaphorical use of the year of the Lord’s favour to express something of the character of salvation as a release from the crushing debt we owe God. Jesus came to release us from the debt we owe God. That truly is good news! It is indeed the time of the Lord’s favour because it is a gift of pure grace.

We can miss Jesus’ point about salvation. And we can also miss the point that this salvation, this forgiveness of sins, this release of debt, is related to how we in turn should regard our earthly debtors. “Although Jesus did not envisage that he would persuade Israel as a whole to keep the Jubilee year he expected his followers to live out the Jubilee principle among themselves. He expected, and taught, that they should forgive one another not only ‘sins’ but also debts. This may help to explain the remarkable practice within the early church whereby resources were pooled...”⁸

⁶ Danker, *Jesus and the new Age*, 106, cited in Garland, *Luke*, p.198

⁷ Johnson

⁸ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 295, cited in Garland, *Luke*, p.200

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Jesus read the Isaiah vision of one anointed to announce good news for the poor, release for the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, release for the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.

He fulfilled this vision in the hearing of his countrymen, because he was the one sent and anointed to bring about this great change, God’s saving work among his people.

But Jesus also commissioned a people – *of which we are part* – to be gathered and formed through scripture and sacrament to be instruments in that great saving work, working together to live out the values of his kingdom now – yes, even *today!*

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