



THE NEW SHOFAR

Now we are and you individually are the Body of Christ

Nehemiah 8:1-10 - - Luke 4:14-21

Epiphany 3

Jerusalem lies in ruins ... God help me rebuild it

Nehemiah first asked to be posted to Jerusalem because of the terrible state in which the people were living. His primary wish was to rebuild the City walls for they were left vulnerable and open to all kinds of exploitation from their many violent neighbours. He saw the future for Jerusalem as needing to have more than just a rebuilding of its structures. The population itself was struggling to survive and these dire circumstances left them squabbling, divided and lacking a central point of focus that could draw them together and give them back meaning and direction to their lives.

One of his challenges was to form once again the *congregation of Yahweh*. This was an old theological term that sought to describe the Hebrew people in terms of their faithfulness to the covenant God had made with them during the Exile. However, when Nehemiah was governor in Jerusalem, the population was racially mixed, what the prophet Zechariah referred to as *a mongrel people*.

What makes a people “God’s people”?

It is outrageous to think of it today but in order to “rebuild” Jerusalem, city and people, laws were imposed expelling all non-Jews from Israel. Any Jew married to a non-Jew was to divorce their spouse and

The origins of the synagogue can be traced back to these times and the synagogue worship proved vital for the long term survival of Judaism . They had no temple and no priesthood, no way of offering sacrifices to God. Do they sit around and do nothing because they have no priests to lead them? No. They gathered weekly in smaller groups and read the scriptures (the Law and the Prophets), discussed what they found, said prayers, sang hymns and prayed for God’s blessings.

marry instead a “pure” Hebrew. During the time the exiles were in Babylon (some seventy years), many of those remaining in the land of Israel married foreigners. Now they were to cast them aside in order to rebuild the nation as God’s holy people.

Sounds racist and evil in today’s world but it made sense in the world at that time and the spiritual importance of the Book of Nehemiah comes from the way Nehemiah governed. He saw himself as doing what *God* wanted—despite the great personal costs. What was it God actually wanted for his people? God wanted the people in general and the spiritual leaders in particular (the Levites) to stop compromising the Law by living in godless ways of the world around them. They were living as Samuel had warned the nation not to be living when they first asked for *a king to rule over them*. They insisted they wanted

to be like the other nations. The prophet reminded them how they were not called to *be like the other nations* but were called to be a light to the world. They were to bring the Truth about Yahweh Israel’s God to all peoples. Sadly, they are living in exactly the same way as the “locals” and there was nothing unique about them or about their spiritual lives. They had nothing to offer the world.

The key to the success of Nehemiah and Ezra was the way they taught the people to pray and to read and share the sacred writings. Jerusalem was in a mess but God was down there in the middle of the

mess calling them to prayer. They had to repent (remember *shub*) and put aside the things of the world they had adopted and rebuild their lives and their communities around God and God alone.

JESUS is the Good News

We can sometimes forget the importance of the person of Jesus in the faith lives of our parish communities. We become all excited about creeds, prayers and ways of worship we can so easily slip past the most significant part of what the Good News is really all about. God's Son became a man and lived among us, as one of us. It is true he came to proclaim the message of God's salvation for all men and women, but more importantly, it is Jesus himself who is the way that salvation becomes a reality for us. To tap into this wonderful gift of the love and mercy of God, we need to have a living relationship with this Living Lord. Nothing is more important in the Gospel of Luke than this single point. Knowing about Jesus does not give the New Life we all seek. Living as Jesus lived; imitating Christ in all we do and say; being with Jesus throughout our daily activities is what opens up salvation for us.

Where was our God when we were suffering? In Babylon alongside of you!

This is why Luke links the prophecy of Isaiah to the opening of the ministry of Jesus. Isaiah was writing to a people who had been living in exile in Babylon, who were emerging from a generation of slavery and abandonment. They had come home to Jerusalem to find the place in ruins, foreigners in charge. There was little food, all kinds of diseases, drought and regular incursions by marauding tribes of bandits. This was the lot of the people of God. Into this world Isaiah addressed his message. It was one that begins by reminding them that they had not been abandoned by God. In fact, in the very environment in which they were finding such suffering, God ***was already at work*** bringing freedom and new life. Where they could only find darkness, Isaiah was saying there is really a light shining.

What does Jesus want?

It was a challenge for the Jewish people to find God at work when on a human level all they could see was ruin, disaster and a deep sense of the hopelessness that was immobilizing them. Could they believe in a loving God in a situation such as this? Luke's answer is to offer Jesus as the one who is the gift of God that fulfills that prophesy.

Jesus is the gift of light illuminating the way to freedom, to a new beginning. Jesus is good news because he does not simply talk about new life. God has made Jesus the *means by which* new life is accessed. Everything found in the Old Testament writings is alive for us today *in Jesus*.

This is why today's reading is so important as the opening of the Gospel. Discipleship is about a relationship with this Son of God and in this Son of God. It is not about theology, or knowledge, or holiness, or sanctity. "Being" a Christian is all about living in Jesus. To put it the way Luke might write it today: it is all about allowing Jesus to live in us and through us — *As He wishes to live*.

Jesus was fully human, fully Jewish and faithful to the religious ways of his community. He did what everyone else did on the Sabbath. He went to synagogue. Josephus, in writing about the Sabbath says that the Jews would give every seventh day over to the study of our customs and laws. Jesus knew his Bible and gathered with others to worship God and say his prayers. It is from within this context that Jesus emerged to take up his ministry. This is the custom that we read about in the Acts. Luke has the early Church following the example of Jesus. They too used to gather at the Temple and in the synagogues for the same things – prayer and the reading and sharing of the scriptures. It is, for Luke, a Spirit-driven model and it should make us wonder why are not following this same model in the renewing of our own faith communities today. We need bible groups and we need prayer groups if we are to be transformed.