

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

At first sight, the Old Testament reading from Nehemiah seems rather bland. All the people have gathered when Ezra reads and interprets from the Book of the Law; the people wept yet told not to grieve but to go home and eat the fat and drink sweet wine. That's it. Clearly, a little context would help. The now-separate Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah are really one book. Anciently, several books circulated under the name of Ezra; not only our Ezra and Nehemiah, but others now preserved in collections of non-canonical books, and perhaps rather lacking in genuine credibility (unlike our Ezra-Nehemiah), such as the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. Also, the present text offers many difficulties as it was extensively edited in antiquity. Our Ezra-Nehemiah takes up the historical narrative where the Book of Chronicles stops. The nation of the Jews (Judah) had been overrun in 587<sup>BC</sup> by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar and those people of the chosen race not banished or killed were taken off to Babylon as slaves. Their king, Zedekiah, had his sons killed in front of him, thus ending the royal line, his eyes were put out and he was dragged off into exile in chains. The Babylonians burned the Temple, the house of God, broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces and destroyed all its precious vessels. The people of the chosen race had lost everything, were utterly bereft; as Psalm 137 tells us; - "By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and wept when we remembered thee O Zion" (Zion is the holy hill on which Jerusalem was built). I always think Boney M got the mood totally wrong in their merry little rendition of that Psalm.

In about 538<sup>BC</sup>, the then Babylonian king Cyrus allowed the remnant of the chosen race to return to Jerusalem as a subject nation, but their attempts to rebuild there were met by much local opposition by the new residents, and it was not until about 400<sup>BC</sup> or so, some 100 to 150 or so years later in the reigns of Artaxerxes I and his son Artaxerxes II, that Ezra and Nehemiah finally managed to rebuild the walls and begin completing the renewal of the Temple.

Our reading is that magic moment when Ezra, producing his treasured and nurtured scroll of the law, reads it to the people. Ezra's scroll was unlikely to have been the full Law of Moses, since that law-code has 613 laws. However, it re-establishes the two-fold promise that God had made to Abraham, namely his descendants will be God's people and they will dwell in the Promised Land. No wonder Nehemiah's people were overwhelmed! Even so, the people of Judah were to remain as a subject nation to a series of oppressive overlords, until the Romans banished them from Jerusalem in 135<sup>AD</sup>, scattering them throughout the Roman world, Europe we now call it, until eventually their land was restored after the Second World War (not without some difficulty!)

The people were then still under foreign subjection in the time of the New Testament and into this hotbed of malcontentedness steps Jesus, and our gospel gives us a picture of his early days at work. My first day at work in my first career in the Royal Navy, catching the 10.53 from Paddington to Newton Abbot, was accompanied I seem to recall, with rather a nonchalant swagger, when trepidation and bewilderment would have been more appropriate, but I was only 18. We know nothing of Jesus's life at 18, in fact nothing after his return from Egypt as a baby until his appearance at his baptism some thirty or so years later (except that he was taken by his parents every year to Jerusalem for the Passover) whatever the rather fanciful pictures of such artists as Millais might infer. At 33, and about the same age as Jesus was at his baptism, I started my second career as a school teacher when I was more sensibly filled with (well concealed) misgivings. Not so Jesus. Our passage tells of his first day at the office. Immediately before this and filled with the power of the Spirit, which he had received at his baptism, he had already begun to make a name for himself in the regions round about. His custom was not merely to worship in the synagogues, but to present his message there. Everybody had started talking about his preaching. People invited him to teach in their synagogues and he was in demand, because his message seemed fresh, it seemed empowered. But Jesus was one of many interpreters of God's word; he stood in a tradition of a long line of rabbinical biblical scholars and interpreters, seeking to reassure the people and give real hope for the future; note Ezra some 4 centuries earlier. Preachers of all religions still do this. Teachers in the synagogues would read out a passage of scripture and then give an exposition of it (just as I am attempting!) When Jesus came home to Nazareth he was invited to offer an interpretation of, perhaps, the scripture reading for the day. After all, Jesus had become a celebrity in the surrounding communities, so surely he would favour the home crowd with a bit of his wisdom. The chazzan, or attendant of the Nazareth synagogue, passed Jesus the Isaiah Scroll and Jesus finds the appointed reading (or maybe he deliberately chose this passage). The passage, from Isaiah 61 is

about the ministry of the Spirit, which served to anoint a preacher who would bring good news to the poor. The text went on to offer details as to the nature of this good news. Captives would be released. The blind would receive their sight. The oppressed would go free. The year of Jubilee (or the 'Lord's favour' as we have it) would be proclaimed. This Spirit-inspired message is one of justice and mercy, of righteousness and freedom. Then Jesus sets out stall, his future ministry, for the first time. After reading the passage he sat down, and with every eye in the congregation focused on him, waiting for him to begin his exposition, he merely says: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." In other words: 'I'm the one Isaiah spoke of. I'm going to do these very things'. There is no further explanation. Instead, the people are firstly amazed, finding his words gracious, then become increasingly hostile as the significance sinks in.

However you view it, Isaiah 61 is a full-blown prophecy of the expected Messiah; God sends his prophet to bring encouragement to the exiled and oppressed, and the prophet has the Spirit of the Lord upon him. The people would have been well acquainted with this passage; it offers real hope of putting aside the oppression of the foreign rulers to become autonomous again, following God's law as delivered by Moses (and Ezra); they were looking for a Spirit-inspired prophet-leader to appear and get rid of the Romans. But Jesus was not what they were expecting. He was dealing with the slavery of sin; the dependence on the trappings of this world; the lack of genuine love for each other.

Luke makes much of the Holy Spirit, both in the Gospel and in his second book, Acts of the Apostles. In fact, in the Book of Acts, the Holy Spirit is the primary actor, moving the expanding early Christian community outward from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. That same Spirit had fallen on Jesus and it was pushing him forward into the world, a world that might not ultimately welcome the message he was preaching. Indeed, due to the fact that the immediately preceding passage plays a central role in the Lenten season, we may forget that after his baptism, the Spirit led Jesus in to the wilderness, where he faced a series of tests that were designed to derail his mission. It is only after this time of testing that Jesus is ready to begin preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom. There were many people who responded positively to his message; Luke says that the people praised his preaching. Of course, as time passed and the message began to sink in not everyone became so impressed and the opposition grew.

This passage shows that the Spirit of the Lord will not be contained by forces seeking to enforce the status quo. The early Christian community attracted some among the wealthy, but for the most part it attracted those living on the margins. Jesus healed people who were cast aside. The ministry of exorcism was in essence an act of freedom from the bonds that prevented people from participating in society. His message of the kingdom offered an alternate realm of life, not one that was in the clouds, but one that challenged the realities of the present age. Jesus, brought up in a peasant village, son of a carpenter was delivering a message of pure hope to the poor and oppressed, but this represented a real threat to the ruling powers, both Jewish initially and then in the wider Roman world. In other words, Jesus's Spirit-empowered ministry was not going to be well received by the powers that be. It would evoke resistance. It still does.

So, what to make of this? Where is the good news? Jack Levison in *40 Days with the Holy Spirit*, writes of the message of Isaiah 61: "There's no stopping the Spirit. Better yet, there's no stopping a leader, whether a messiah or a servant or a prophet, whom the Spirit of God anoints". After Jesus's ascension, the Spirit fell on those early followers of Jesus, and empowered them to preach the good news of God's realm. That same calling remains with us to this day! So it's up to us now.