

THE WORD OF GOD THEN AND NOW

Epiphany 3 Year C

Neh. 8:1-10; Ps. 19; 1 Cor. 12:12-31a; Lk. 4:14-21

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Have you ever travelled or lived in another country? Do you know what it is like to be among people whose language you do not understand? My only real experiences of that was first when I went to Elcho Island, an aboriginal community in the Northern Territory, to work for several months, way back in my early 20s and then about 10 years ago when we went to Bali for 2 weeks for the wedding of one of my daughters. Both times, however, the indigenous people spoke pretty good English, so it wasn't such a big deal. But I am sure that many of you have had this kind of experience, where the local people do not speak English and you have learned to communicate in that environment.

In the book of Nehemiah the people of Israel had been living in a foreign land. They hadn't travelled there because it was a great place for a holiday, as it might be for us. They were there against their will. They had been taken there as the spoils of war—and most of them had not been having a particularly great time of it. They had to learn a new language, fit in with a new culture and learn to adapt to their new way of life, constantly looking with longing for the time they might return to Jerusalem and their homeland. One unknown poet captured the broken-hearted longing of the exiles for their home, in a song a lamentation which we call Psalm 137—popularised by Boney M:

*By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept
when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we
hung up our lyres. For there our captors required
of us songs and our tormentors mirth, saying 'Sing
us one of the songs of Zion.' How shall we sing the
Lord's song in a foreign land?*

You can hear the people crying that poem. You can feel their pain—far from home, captives in a foreign land, longing for home and freedom.

But now, after many years, they have finally been allowed to return. They have rebuilt the city of Jerusalem and its surrounding walls. As part of their celebration for all this, they asked Ezra, the priest, to read the law of Moses to them in the public square. When they heard it, they wept for their sins, for the pain of their years in exile, and for joy in the LORD

who was their strength. Perhaps the familiar words read in their home, after years of despair, reassured them that God was in control.

The Word of God at that time was known as the Law—basically the Pentateuch—the first five books of the Old Testament as we have them today. It told the story of God’s special relationship with his chosen people. The Ten Commandments were a key part of this relationship. The Law, however, was more than just a set of rules for God’s people, it was an indication of God’s love for them—God’s care in showing them how to live in this world. It gave them an identity as the people characterized by this behaviour. Love for God and love for other people was to be the way of life for God’s chosen people.

The proclamation in the public square signified that the people had returned home, to their calling and place in this world. It was harder to realize that when they were in Babylon, far away from their true home. Back in Jerusalem, however, they had a renewed sense of hope and restoration. It was good to hear the Word of God once again.

Now move a few centuries forward to a synagogue in Nazareth. Perhaps by this time the people were becoming complacent about the Law. In fact, this can be seen throughout the Old Testament when time and time again, the people strayed from the path God had chosen for them. It certainly didn’t have the impact it did for returning exiles in Nehemiah’s day. You know how it is—the shine wears off with time. People become complacent. Sure, the traditions were being upheld, and it was pretty much business as usual, with the Sabbath rhythms keeping the people confident of their place in the world.

Then Jesus stands up and reads from Isaiah.

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release for captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.

There was nothing particularly unusual about that. It was through the politeness and tradition of the people that Jesus was invited to read that day in the Synagogue—and this was the text for the day. What he does next, however, is monumental. He sits down to teach—as the reader for the day would—but then opening his remarks by saying that *he* is the fulfillment of the prophecy. *He* is the one who has been anointed—chosen and

empowered by God—to preach good news to the poor. *He* is the one sent to pardon the prisoners, heal the blind and release those broken down by injustice.

Now, as you are probably well aware, that did not go down particularly well with his hearers who subsequently sought to throw him off a cliff. But that's what can happen—either literally or metaphorically—if you upset the religious status quo. It happens in churches all the time—mainly metaphorically, that is.

Jesus was simply saying what he was going to do, and as we know from the rest of the gospel stories, he did it. He really was the living, breathing good news. He embodied the Word of God. He went around working to restore things to the way they should be. He knew what the world and all its creatures were supposed to look like, and how they were supposed to act. He was there at the creation of it all, so he knew how to make people right again—both within themselves and in their relationship with God. No wonder he spent so much time teaching about forgiveness, and healing people from their suffering. Jesus wanted everyone to know that God wants all people to be whole, at peace and restored in every way—physically, mentally and spiritually.

Now move a few centuries forward again. What is the Word of God to us today? Of course we have the Bible. But we also have the calling of God and the Holy Spirit within us—the same calling and Spirit that Jesus had. We, too, should be able to say to those around us, “Today, the Word of God is fulfilled right in front of you.” We are God's good news to the world.

Now, I don't mean by that that we are now like Jesus in the full sense of who Jesus is—far from it. But through us, others can know that God is still determined to make us whole again. We can proclaim it in words. We can also proclaim it in our lives—in the way in which we live and work and in our relationships with God and with others. God can do the work of restoration through us. If we allow him, God can use us in the cause of reconciliation. It is our purpose as God's people to be characterized by love, and to proclaim God's loving desire to restore everyone to fellowship with their Creator.

How do we do this? Jesus gave a few examples from the book of Isaiah, but he spelled it out for us in numerous ways throughout his own ministry. He fed the hungry, forgave sins,

healed the sick. His life was centred on others, not himself. He cared about each one, doing everything in his power to restore them to well-being.

And so that's the life to which we are also called. A life that is centred on others, not on ourselves. We look for ways to serve the people we know. We hear about suffering and do what we can to ease the pain. When we can't give any money or go to those in need, we pray for them. We support the work and gifts of other people who are more able-bodied, so that God's good Word can continue to make a difference in this world in which we live.

We are called to be the bearers of the Word of God to the world. God has no Plan B for this. It is *our* task, through the power of the Holy Spirit within *us*, as it was in Christ, to enter into Christ's work—to enter into *his* mission in the world in which we live.

It is *our* task to bring good news to the poor—to bring hope to the hopeless—to bring comfort and compassion to those who are hurting?

It is *our* task to proclaim release to the captives. Not just physical prisons but to bring release to those who are in prisons of their own making, or a prison, through other circumstances, that has been made for them?

It is *our* task to proclaim recovery of sight to the blind. To help bring sight to eyes that have been blinded by sin or grief or anger? To bring reconciliation to those who need to be reconciled?

It is *our* task to let the oppressed go free. To help free those who are oppressed by others or by sin or guilt or bitterness or resentment?

It is also our task to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour—the wonderful grace of God, available to all, and to witness, in our own lives, to the joy of knowing Christ?

Let us all acknowledge Christ's mission and make it our own. As the returned exiles, wept as they heard Ezra recite to them the Law—as it cut them to the quick and brought repentance—so let us hear God's call to us today.

In Christ, we are the good news, fulfilled today for those around us.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.