**Renewed by God’s Word. January 23 2022**

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

I was reading this week about some of the details of the Spanish Flu Epidemic and I was struck by many similarities. The world of that time was so different, yet the actions they took were in many cases very similar to actions we have taken over the past two years.

For some there have been elements of nostalgia in this time. A simpler life, more time with immediate family members, really living in a local area, walks in local parks, shopping from local stores, trying out new recipes as a family, more time with pets and in the garden. In some ways there has been an emphasis on simple values, kindness, patience, care for neighbours. For some this has been a great opportunity to return to a simpler lifestyle and a slower pace.

Dramatic changes in our circumstances often prompt reappraisal and may trigger a return to former cherished practices. The children of Israel had been in Exile in Babylon and had finally been allowed to return to Israel and rebuild the walls of the City and the Temple. This was a time to remember and rebuild their lives as a people.

The people of Ezra and Nehemiah’s day recognised a need to return to hearing the Word of God and responding to it.

**These people were deeply committed to this process**

The people gathered themselves together. There is nothing to suggest that they were called to take this action by their leaders, it appears to have been a “grassroots” movement which then approaches Ezra and asks Ezra to get the book of the law of Moses and read it to them. This book refers to the whole of what we would call the Pentateuch, the first 5 books of the Bible, so it includes stories of the history of Israel as well as “instructions that could enable them to live as a wholesome and joyful community.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The people were physically involved in the preparation for this process. They erected a platform for the occasion to enable Ezra to be elevated over the crowd so that all could see and hear him.

They were physically involved in the process, the stood in reverence as Ezra opened the scroll, a tradition which in part has been modified and incorporated by our friends in the Roman Catholic tradition, and some in the Anglican tradition who stand when the gospel is being read.

They listened to the Word of God intently for many hours. These people were proactive and passionate about hearing what God would say to them through their Scriptures.

**They were all involved in learning together**

This was a large scale activity. The passage states that all the people gathered together, in fact over the twelve verses there are ten specific references to *“all the people”.[[2]](#footnote-2)* The passage states quite clearly that men, women and children who were able to understand, presumably older children, all were gathered together to listen. This is a highly inclusive gathering, they are all together listening. As Ezra read we hear that two other groups of people, some Levites and some other people, moved around amongst the people interpreting the Scriptures to them, enabling them to understand and apply the Scriptures to their context. The Hebrew word *meporas* has a breadth of meanings including to translate, to make clear, and to interpret.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Our gospel reading highlighted the scope of Jesus ministry, that he had come to all the people and particularly there is an emphasis on the *“outsiders”* within the community, the poor, the blind, the prisoners, the oppressed. This was an emphasis that many of the religious people of Jesus day would find difficult. Jesus from the outset is making it clear that his ministry will transform lives in amazing ways and this will include a wide variety of people many of whom would have low standing in their broader communities.

This message of Jesus is given in the Synagogue, the focal point in the Hebrew community for the reading and interpretation of Scripture. So we see Jesus, like Ezra engaging in this process, which had been a common part of his regular practice.

The Epistle today also emphasises the scope of the Christian community as Paul reminds the Corinthians that they are a diverse community yet all part of one body and all called to work together.

The people of God whether in Temple, Synagogue, Early Christian communities or our churches today were challenged to remember that we are part of a large and diverse family of God who should constantly be open to being challenged by the Word of God.

The involvement all who could understand Ezra’s readings reminds us all, that we also need to wrestle with Scripture together, and that we can learn from a wide range of people.

**They were eager to respond to God**

Finally the people of Ezra’s community showed that they were eager to respond to what they heard God saying to them through the Scriptures. The people respond to Scripture by raising their hands as a sign of their expectancy and their dependence on God. Their willingness to obey God was demonstrated through them bowing their heads and kneeling or lying prostrate on the ground.[[4]](#footnote-4)

They affirm that God is worthy of their praise with the words Amen, Amen after Ezra’s declaration of praise to God.

When Ezra finished reading they responded with weeping, like the people of Josiah’s time.[[5]](#footnote-5) However, on this occasion they were told not to weep but to rejoice in the Lord. They had a new level of understanding of God’s Word and they should rejoice. This time was set aside for rejoicing. God’s joy within us gives strength, and rejoicing in God also gives us strength. For the children of Israel the joy they experience as they celebrate God’s Word to them will strengthen them in the times of soul searching which will lie ahead.

The people had gained a much stronger understanding of God and what God wanted them to do. There is a very clear emphasis on the people growing in understanding throughout the passage.[[6]](#footnote-6) In obedience to their new understandings, a part of their response a little later in the chapter is to recommence celebrating the Festival of Booths. During the Festival they listened as Ezra continued to read to them each day.

We really understand when we live by the text. When it changes our actions and attitudes. Not merely when we have an academic understanding of its historical form and context. The Hebrew word for hearing “*sama”* encompasses hearing and obeying. The obedience described here is spontaneous, voluntary, not imposed, it comes from their relationship with God.

**So how should we then in our day respond to this passage.**

This passage reflects a time when God is working to renew the people of God, and their openness to hearing the Word of God is a vital part of their renewal.Likewise in our day God moves amongst us and can bring renewal to the church. As we move on in this New Year

**What may renewal look like for us?**

A renewed commitment to studying and living by Scripture

A refining of our attitudes and actions towards those who are marginalised in our communities

A renewed commitment to work with our first peoples for a better future

An openness to God setting us free from those things which may “bind” us

A willingness to release others through forgiveness

An openness to God healing our broken lives

A renewed commitment to working together, recognising the gifts of God in our church community

It may take many forms, but a good place to start is in openness and commitment to God speaking to us through God’s Word.

1. Ralph W. Klein, “Nehemiah: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” in Leander E. Keck et al. (Eds) *The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes,*(Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1999) 800-803 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Nehemiah 8:1, 3, 5 (3 times), 6, 9 (twice), 11, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Klein, “Nehemiah: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections, 800-801 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Klein, “Nehemiah: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” 800-801 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 2 Kings 22:11, 19; 2 Chronicles 34:19, 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Nehemiah 8:2, 3, 7, 8, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)