

Sunday Morning Worship
Readings, Reflection & Prayers for 26th January

Nehemiah 8.1-3, 5-6, 8-10

All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law.



And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen', lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, 'This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.' For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, 'Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.'

This is the word of the Lord

1 Corinthians 12.13-31a

For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'

On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

This is the word of the Lord.

Luke 4.14-21

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

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

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

Reflection by Rob Holdsworth

I'm going to focus on the Gospel passage, but I'd like to touch on the OT and NT readings first because of their relevance to us.

Nehemiah first: ok, it's c.450BC and not 2025, but when Nehemiah was writing it felt like things used to be better faith-wise in their country; there weren't many of God's people around, and those believers who were there were being publicly ridiculed by the powers that be; and there was opposition to what they wanted to do. That's what the previous chapters of Nehemiah tell us, and it all sounds pretty familiar; doesn't it?

Corinth: ok it's c.55AD and not 2025, but, as the previous chapters tell us, sadly there were factions in the church in Corinth; they couldn't agree on what was acceptable; and anyway they were living in a city with very, very different priorities, and a very, very different world view. That's the context to today's NT passage, and it all sounds very familiar; doesn't it?

What's to be done? Answer: back to the scriptures and the core principles found in them.

In Nehemiah, that's what the people of God ask for: bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, they say; and so Ezra reads from it; and there was a sermon (so: 5hrs of readings and sermon in total; don't worry!), and at the heart of the sermon is encouraging news. Notice the changed reaction of the listeners, from sorrow to joy, as you heard. The outcome? I'll come back to that.

And in Paul's letter, we see Paul reminding the Christians of some core principles, aimed at helping them together meet the challenges that they faced as a church, and I'll come back to that too.

It would have been something, wouldn't it: to have been there, that day in Jerusalem with Nehemiah and Ezra, or to have been there in the church in Corinth that day when Paul's letter was received, but it would have been nothing compared with being in the synagogue in Nazareth that day when Jesus was there.

His listeners that day would have been familiar with their scriptures; they were read every week, scriptures that spoke of a *longing* for things to be different, a longing for freedom from oppression. They would have been familiar with the *promise* in the scriptures, especially in the prophets, for instance in those verses from Isaiah that Jesus quotes, that speak of the Servant of the Lord, blessed with the Holy Spirit, God's chosen One, the One Who will open eyes that are blind, free captives, and bring release to those in darkness. Isaiah's prophecy is shot through with this sense, this promise, that somebody's coming; somebody's coming.

And so Jesus is in the synagogue on the Sabbath, and He's asked to read. He stands to do so, as was normal practice then, and He reads out those verses from Isaiah: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because He has anointed me...; He has sent me'. And then He rolls up the scroll and sits down to speak, as the preachers did in those days. And so, in answer to the *longing*, and the *promise*, comes the *announcement*. Picture yourself there; how the eyes of everyone were fastened on Jesus, riveted. You could have heard a pin drop. Listen to how He begins the sermon: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' So: today is the fulfilment that you've all been waiting for.

Question: what did it mean for the scriptures to be fulfilled during Jesus's ministry on earth? The four Gospels give us the answer. Most of those who chose to be close to Jesus were the poor, the oppressed, the blind, the 'bottom of the pile, without power' people. Not the worldly-successful people, with one or two exceptions for sure: Zachaeus, Nicodemus, but mostly it was exactly the people that Isaiah described. Remember when John the Baptist was in prison? We don't know why, but John sends messengers to ask Jesus: 'Are you the One who is to come?', and Jesus told John's followers: 'Go back and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight; the lame walk; the deaf hear; good news is preached to the poor'. It was those who chose to be with Jesus who found Him meeting their deepest needs. As Jesus says in today's Gospel, and as the other Gospels confirm, what Jesus did, He did in the power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit Who had been with Him from the moment of His conception, the Spirit Who had descended visibly on

Jesus at His baptism, the Spirit Who had led Jesus into the wilderness before His ministry began. And after this Sabbath day in Nazareth, well: the Gospels tell us of the miracles, of His love lived out every day, extravagant not measured, gallons of Cana love as Lindsey said last Sunday. That's what it meant for the scriptures to be fulfilled during Jesus's ministry on earth. And then on the cross and after the ascension, the fulfilment of the scriptures takes wings and spreads, in the power of the Holy Spirit, including to Worcester in 2025, because God's rescue plan, fulfilled in Jesus, still holds out that same offer of liberation to all of us.

Question: but what does it mean for you and me, for us today, for those verses in Isaiah to be fulfilled? May I make three suggestions.

Firstly I remind myself that I am still poor, still needing freedom, sight, and release. Okay I've enough money in my bank account, but am I yet, are we yet, fully rich in terms of the true currency that has Jesus's name running through it, the currency of kindness, love, generosity? Am I, are we, fully free from bad habits or still oppressed by some? What about my blind spots? We live, don't we, in a confident Western society, surrounded by people who proclaim that we have the answers to everything; we're free, they say; there's no need for God; we can see clearly; we're enlightened. Well, the Pharisees thought that they were the enlightened ones too, but they weren't, and there's more work that I need God to do in me. That's why every Sunday, as you & I come to communion, we need to make our confession *and do so*, saying the words that we do. As those men, women and children stood in that square in Jerusalem, so we too stand for the reading of our Gospel, and as we do so, like them, we too, all of us, can find encouragement, find joy in the Lord, in our forgiveness, in our rededicated commitment to Him, as they did. And as we do this, the scripture is fulfilled today in Worcester.

Secondly, although most of what Jesus read is from Isaiah ch61, when Jesus read the words from Isaiah about 'releasing the oppressed', he was reading from what is to us part of Isaiah ch58, when God was expressing

His concern through the prophet to people who were good at doing religious things, fasting, turning to God on the Sabbath, even prostrating themselves before him, but God says through Isaiah: 'Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free? Is it not to share your food with the hungry, to provide the poor with shelter? That's the passage that Jesus was referring to. Remember how in Nehemiah the people went and gave food to those who had none? That was their response to what they heard read. So often in his Gospel, Luke highlights the social aspect of Jesus's ministry and teaching, and the Christian church has rightly been great at being at the forefront of caring over the centuries, mirroring God's overflowing generosity to us. Of course there's still plenty of work to do today, and the same practical concerns that marked Jesus's ministry are ours too, responding practically in His name to people in desperate need, with those gallons of Cana love, and as we follow Jesus's example, the Spirit of the Lord is upon us, and the scripture is fulfilled in Worcester.

Thirdly, and with those verses in Paul's letter to the church at Corinth in mind, let's remember that if we're to do anything of lasting value we need the help of the Holy Spirit, and the spiritual gifts that He gives. At the heart of today's NT reading is the truth that Christians have spiritual gifts – we do at St Stephen's, each of us does, differing gifts which, put together, are all we need, and Paul's point is that as we use them, so the body of the church, St Stephen's, will flourish, and all our gifts are equally valuable and equally important; there's no hierarchy; they are God's gifts to St Stephen's, through Lindsey for sure in many ways, but through you, through me too, through us all together, because Christian work isn't something to be done only by those who are in full-time paid church ministry. I thank God for this caring church, where so many people look out for each other, and look out for people who aren't yet part of the church, just like the hand that comes to bandage the injured foot, or the foot that hurries to take the injured head to hospital, in love, so practical caring with God in us to help us to keep going, to live out the Great

Commission in joy and with courage too, and as we do so, the Spirit of the Lord is upon us, and the scripture is fulfilled in Worcester.

So, to me, our readings today encourage us, and call us to respond in action. The people in that Jerusalem square in Nehemiah's time found joy and gave food to the poor; I, we can too; maybe you and I can offer a helping hand to someone this week, make a telephone call to someone who'd welcome it, take something round to the food bank, be the feet that bring good news to someone else, in the church or not, be a support to someone who's down, maybe down and out, and now we know so much more about Christians around the world, let's remember that they too are part of the body and they too need our support. Whether it's at Open Church, or Good Companions, or for Julia on Thursdays cooking lunch for people who know all too well what oppression and actual imprisonment feel like, or for you in so many other ways, in prayer, let's have this as our aim for the week: to come to church next Sunday, able to look back and say 'This week, the scriptures have been fulfilled in Worcester.'

Prayers

To the bidding "**Lord in your mercy**" please respond "**hear our prayer**".

Lord we pray for your church throughout the world.

We pray for our own Diocese, for Bishop Martin, for our Clergy, Readers and Authorised Lay Minsters.

We give grateful thanks for everyone who contributes so freely of their time and gifts to support this churches mission and its service to the wider community.

And we pray for the work of the Crown Nominations Committee, and its members from our Diocese, as they undertake the important work of selecting a candidate to be the 114th bishop of Worcester.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord This week has marked the arrival of a new President of the United States and with his coming renewed hope for peace in the world. We pray for him and for all who will work with him. We pray for the leaders of all the countries of the world. Help them so that together they may pursue the search for peace.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord help us to understand that we are one body, that there is no division We are each a wave of the same ocean. Help us to use our gifts to build a world where communities are guided by love and truth, where peace reigns, where people are not divided by race or religion, where darkness and despair have been cast aside and where authority only comes from doing your will.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord strengthen **our** faith, open **our** eyes to see our Saviour alive in the heart of our worship, in the words of the liturgy, in the lift of the music and in our receiving of the blessed sacrament.

Teach us that prayer is true, enduring and full of grace and ties us to you through the deepest workings of the Holy Spirit.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for our own community, for our families and friends wherever they maybe and ask that you watch over them. Fill our homes with holiness, love, kindness, generosity, and goodness. Help us to extend hands of friendship and acts of kindness to one another.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We give thanks for the blessing of children and young people in our church community, for the POG Youth Group, Sunday Stars, Little Stars, Brownies, Sticky Fingers, 187 Sqdn and for our outreach to Northwick Manor and Perdiswell Primary Schools.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord we pray for all who have had to leave their home because of illness, for all who can no longer cope on their own, for those whose mobility or agility is failing them and for friends and loved ones who are sick.

From our own community we pray especially for:

Faie Rose, Rosie Goddard, Christine Dunne, Bill Jones, Leon and Valda Bailey, Ken and Joyce Pringle, Ann Hunt, Anuwat Wanggane, Alan Coe, Jack Tubby, Gloria, Roger Jones, Patricia Ash, Ryan Day, Brenda Hulland, David New, Sue Wright, Meriel Orton, and Adrina and Alan Price.

And as we share a moment of silence together, we bring before you those known only unto ourselves.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We remember the recently departed:

Gaynor 'Gill' Crutchley, June Hume and Reginald John Faulkner and we pray for all who mourn.

We remember with love and gratitude those whose anniversary falls at this time:

Eileen Sutton, Mary Pink, Dillon Emmanuel, Barbara Bristow, Cyril Bunn, Margaret Burfitt, Mildred Heywood, Bob Kington and Michael Thompson and those we love but see no longer.

Eternal rest grant unto them O Lord and let perpetual light shine upon them.

May they rest in peace and rise in glory.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord may we who come to your table with joyful and expectant hearts, be nourished and strengthened in body and spirit to serve you in this world, to the glory of your name.

Merciful Father

Accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.