

## *Proclaiming and Hearing the Word*

By **Thomas Petri, O.P.**

January 23, 2022 - Third Sunday Ordinary Time

Readings: Nehemiah 8.2-4, 5-6, 8-10; 1 Corinthians 12.12-30; Luke 1.1-4; 4.14-21.

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### Restoring Israel in God's Word

The reading from *The Book of Nehemiah* proclaimed at this weekend's Mass brings us to a pivotal moment in the life of Israel. The chosen people have returned to the chosen land and have gathered in Jerusalem. They had been in exile in Babylon for seventy years—an exile precipitated by their infidelity to the covenant they made with God.

This is a recurring theme throughout the Old Testament. God calls His people to a relationship, and they enter into this relationship, into a covenant, with Him. He protects them, fights for them, and provides for them. Sin being what it is, the chosen people eventually veer off the way from their covenant. Their infidelity usually takes the form of idolatry—think of the Israelites worshipping the golden calf at the base of Mt. Sinai or King Solomon's obsession with women, some of whom turn his heart to pagan worship.

This time it was the Prophet Jeremiah who warned of impending doom for Israel. God spoke through Jeremiah and warned that the whole land would become a ruin and a waste. In fact, he prophesied that Babylon would conquer and subjugate Israel because of their infidelity to the Lord (see Jer 25.9-12). And then it happened. At the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, King Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem, destroyed Solomon's temple, and carried the Israelites off to slavery.

It is always in the moments of despair, when God seems to have abandoned us, that we finally turn back to Him. The Old Testament is filled with poetry and canticles of God calling out to His wayward and beloved Israel, and of Israel finding her way back to Him. When she finally comes to Him, God rouses His might and once again defends His beloved. The Persians defeat the Babylonians, and King Cyrus lets the Israelites return to their land, where they set out to rebuild the Temple and to restore their religion.

The priest Ezra, who has his own book in the Old Testament, is known for preaching fidelity and obedience to God's law. Having lived in exile in a foreign land, the Israelites came to understand more profoundly that their worship of God was tied to Jerusalem—to the Holy Land. Now here they were on the very spot where the temple once stood.

Ezra gathers all the men, the women, and the children old enough to understand. Then he stands on a wooden platform, unrolls the scroll of the law of the Lord, and reads from daybreak until midday. The people listen intently. He's reading the law to them; he's reading God's word to them. He's giving them back their history, their identity, who they are, right there in the place set apart in Jerusalem for worship.

They were there just listening for about six or seven hours. They were moved by it: bowing down to the ground, lying prostrate, and weeping in repentance. Finally, when all was said and done, Ezra sends them up to a feast: "Eat rich food and drink sweet drinks!" Today is holy to the Lord your God! Do not be sad on this day!

There is power in the proclamation of the Word of God. The Word had touched their hearts, moved them to repent, and then they feasted because it was a holy day.

## The Word Becomes Flesh

However, as inspirational, as moving, and as powerful as Ezra's proclamation of God's Word was, it was only a preview, a foreshadowing of what was to come. The Word of God himself, the *Logos*, wouldn't stay confined to a scroll, to a written page. The Word of God came into the world. Jesus Christ, the living Word made flesh, would come to His people. His presence, His proclamation is not simply a verbal one. His teaching is not simply an instruction. His deeds are not simply acts relegated to the past. Everything He said and did was united to His divinity.

In the Gospel today, St. Luke gives us a parallel to Ezra's proclamation of the law to the people. Only here, it is our Lord himself who is led by the power of the Spirit throughout Galilee and into Nazareth, where he enters the synagogue. Like Ezra before Him, He stood up to read from the scroll, though this time it is a passage from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord."

And then He sits down.

Do not be misled by the apparent lack of drama in the scene. There may not have been the weeping, bowing, prostrating, and emotional gusto that Ezra encountered centuries earlier, but the people in the synagogue, St. Luke tells us, were looking intently at Him. The service came to a halt! Imagine Mass stopping while everyone stares at the lector who just proclaimed the second reading!

Something was stirring in the people. This was true wherever Jesus went and wherever He preached. Even if they didn't know He was the Son of God, they knew He was different, since He taught with authority. Imagine their reaction when He looked back at them and simply said, "Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing."

Today!

Right now!

The One that God promised to Isaiah, the Anointed One who would bring glad tidings to the poor and liberty to the captives—that One is in your midst today. Today, this passage has been fulfilled.

## Encountering the Word in the Mass

At the beginning of his Gospel, St. Luke tells us that he set out to compile a narrative of the events that "have been fulfilled among us . . . after investigating everything anew. . . so that you may realize the certainty of the teachings you have received" (Luke 1.1-4).

The passages of scripture that we hear proclaimed at Mass week after week are more than mere stories we are told in order to get information or to elicit an emotional response. These passages form a narrative. The proclamation of the Gospel is especially dynamic since we believe the work of Christ's redemption continues in our own time. The passage of Isaiah was not only fulfilled in that synagogue a couple thousand years ago; it is fulfilled in our hearing at the Mass.

Like those Israelites so many centuries ago, we come to Mass to hear the word of God, to be reminded of who we are, to repent, and to feast at the altar on the Holy Eucharist. Like the Jews sitting in that synagogue in Nazareth, we come to Mass to hear how the Lord Himself fulfills the promises of God, not in the past, but today in our lives and in our world.

The proclamation of the Gospel, especially, carries within it the same Spirit of Christ that makes Christ present in the Eucharist. That Spirit makes Him present in the proclamation of the Gospel at Mass, although in a different mode. The narratives in the Scriptures are not just stories. The very telling of those narratives in the liturgy make present Christ's saving activity for every hearer. It is as though we ourselves are sitting in that synagogue, and Jesus is saying to us: "Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing."

For lack of a better word, we might say that the events of salvation, the events of Christ's life, have been "translated" into the Word without losing any of their power, any of their significance. Because Jesus Christ who is man is also divinely eternal, everything He says and does pierces through history to us today.

For anyone who is disposed by faith to the action of the Gospel, the Gospel becomes a point of encounter with Christ here and now. We must be attentive; we must hear; we must look upon Him intently just as those Jews in that synagogue did 2000 years ago.

That's what we hope to do at every Mass: to encounter Him in the Word, and then to see Him in the Sacrament at the Feast of the Altar. This in turn should lead us to repentance and a real weeping not only for our sins but in joy for the redemption of Christ. This day is holy! Week after week, we find ourselves slowly being purified and transformed into beloved children of God—the promises of Christ being fulfilled in us.

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### *Suggested Reading*

- *M. Levering, [Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible: Ezra & Nehemiah](#)*
- *Pope St. John Paul II, [Dies Domini](#), no. 41*
- *Pope Francis, [Evangelii gaudium](#), nos. 135-149*
- *Pope Benedict XVI, [Verbum Domini](#), nos. 52-59*

### *In Short . . .*

- *Ezra's proclamation from the Book of the Law restored the people's identity as God's chosen people.*
- *Jesus himself is the fulfillment of God's promise as proclaimed by Isaiah.*
- *The proclamation of the Gospel in the mass is especially dynamic since we believe the work of Christ's redemption continues in our own time. The passage of Isaiah was not only fulfilled in that synagogue a couple thousand years ago; it is fulfilled in our hearing at the Mass.*
- *In the proclamation of the Gospel, the events of Christ's life have been "translated" into the Word without losing any of their power, any of their significance. Because Jesus Christ who is man is also divinely eternal, everything he says and does pierces through history to us today.*