

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time “Nehemiah Ezra and Jesus”

Fr. Frank Schuster

The first reading from Nehemiah seems very timely for our parish right now; indeed, perhaps for the whole Church. The backstory here is that the Jews have finally been liberated from their exile in Babylon and they are now slowly but steadily returning to Jerusalem after having been away for 80 years or so. The generation that suffered the destruction of the great Temple along with the rest of Jerusalem at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar had long since passed away. The Jews returning to Jerusalem are their descendants. A number of them had kept the faith all those many years, even when it was outlawed for them to do so. A number of those returning didn't practice the faith. They, or their parents before them, had long since fallen away. They are all back now in Jerusalem. Nehemiah is essentially the secular ruler overseeing the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple. Ezra is the high priest whose mission was to teach the people how to practice their faith again, to reintroduce public worship, even if it meant starting out worshiping in the rubble like they were doing in our reading today. It is therefore very moving to me that Ezra gathers the people and starts reading the Torah to them from dawn until noon. If you think my homilies are long, they were there for six hours or more listening to Ezra's every word as he reintroduced the faith to them. As he was doing so, the people wept, wept and they wept. There were tears of joy, to be sure. There were also tears of sorrow because the work required to rebuild Jerusalem was going to take years.

Why do I believe this first reading is very timely for our parish right now; indeed perhaps for the whole Church? As a people, we have obviously not been conquered and sent to a foreign country. However, I don't think we have all come to grips with how devastating Covid-19 has been for us as a people of faith. I will never forget having to celebrate Easter Vigil a couple years ago by myself, a handful of helpers, and my cell phone video recording the service. That was very devastating for me personally because Easter Vigil is my favorite celebration. I was supposed to be baptizing new Catholics that evening. Instead, I went to bed in tears that night. That following Christmas wasn't that much better. I remember only being able to see my parents and relatives over Zoom on Thanksgiving and Christmas as I ate dinner by myself. That was awful. I am not alone here. Many of you had the same experience as I did and perhaps worse. For several months at the beginning of the pandemic, you all remember that people were not even allowed to come to Sunday Mass. The only time I saw at least some of my parishioners was during the open hours for private prayer that we were still permitted to have. During those open hours I would periodically come and quietly offer communion to anyone who happened to be there. I lost count how many times I saw grown men and women crying when I offered them communion. They had tears streaming down their faces. They were tears of joy in those moments while at the same time being tears of sorrow. That experience reminds me of our first reading from Nehemiah recalling the people weeping in the rubble while the Torah was read.

I believe this reading from Nehemiah is also very timely because, like these Jews returning from captivity, we will have the same task ahead of us of rebuilding our community once our Covid exile is over. Like them, we will not be the same people as before. We will have changed since how we were before the pandemic. For one, all the things we took for granted before the pandemic will hopefully not be taken for granted going forward. I think about that

every time I sit in a barber's chair getting a haircut. When haircuts were outlawed, I recall watching a You Tube video on how to cut my own hair. What a complete disaster. On Sundays prior to the pandemic, I confess I always somehow took it for granted that I would process into a full church for Mass. I will never take that for granted again either. I think a number of us perhaps took for granted that Mass would always be available and that a priest would always be there for the sacraments. I hope you will not take that for granted anymore too.

However, I suspect we will be tempted to. I imagine we just might be tempted to. As things evolve into a new sense of normal, a number of us just might be tempted to return to a spiritual place where we simply take our faith and our parish community for granted. Worse than that, I suspect some of the parishioners who came to Church prior to the pandemic may never return again. On the other hand, I will always celebrate Easter Vigil as if it is my last let me tell you. All of this has a way of helping me understand Nehemiah and Ezra in way I wouldn't otherwise. Nehemiah and Ezra teach me how joy and sorrow can come together in every teardrop.

The prayers of Nehemiah and Ezra were of course answered by arrival of the Son of God in the Person of Jesus Christ. Ezra read the Torah to the people in the ruins of Jerusalem for the first time in decades. It was the first time many of them had even heard it. In our Gospel reading, Jesus reads from the Book of Isaiah in the synagogue and says something very startling and very profound. After reading the passage, he rolled up the scroll and sat down. Everybody's eyes were fixed on him. And Jesus says, "Today, this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." What is fulfilled in our hearing? Jesus tells them that, "The Spirit of the Lord" anointed him. That word "anoint" in Hebrew is where we get the word Messiah. In Greek, it is where we get the word "Christ". Christ means "anointed one". Ok. Jesus is anointed to do what exactly? He is anointed to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.

My friends, I invite us to take some time this week to simply reflect on where we were spiritually before the pandemic and to compare that to where we are now. What's different now? What's the same? Every one of us will arrive at our own unique answers because we are many parts and yet one body. In what ways were we spiritually impoverished along the way, desperate for glad tidings? When were the times we felt oppressed or captive, desperate for liberty? In what ways have we been blind to our spiritual needs and the needs of others? Can we bring our answers to these questions to Jesus this week in our prayer? Just as Jesus was the answer to the prayers of Nehemiah and Ezra, Jesus is also the answer to every one of our prayers for the simple reason that we cannot save ourselves. Only Jesus can save us. And so, as we reflect on the past and move forward into the future, there is one more question for us to consider. As Christians, we might ask ourselves, what would it look like for me to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord?