

‘Repent and believe the Good News: Squaring up to the Challenges’

by

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Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,8-10; Ps 19; 1 Cor 12:12-31; **Luke 4:14-21**

Introduction

In keeping with the scripture, which we have heard this morning; we have a vision of what we hope it means to be Christian and Australian. It's a day that we, in this Cathedral and those gathered in other places, may see as one designated for us to express our thanks to God: thanks for giving us birth in this land or thanks for calling us out of the land of our birth to life here. The words of our portions of scripture this morning set before us, first, the example of the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Nehemiah 1-3, 5-6, 8-10

The people of Israel were taken captive into exile in Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar II. The king did so after destroying the Kingdom of Judah and Jerusalem (587 BC). Some fifty years later, Babylon fell (539 BC) to Cyrus the Great, the first King of Kings of Persia. Nehemiah was a high official who served the fifth King of Kings, Artaxerxes I. Nehemiah was told about the 'great trouble and shame' (Nehemiah 1:3) of the descendants of his people who had escaped captivity and returned to Judah. He approached the King on behalf of his people. Artaxerxes appointed him as governor of the province and gave him resources to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah and Ezra arrived within a few years of each other. Ezra, priest and scribe, was knowledgeable and experienced in administering the law given by God to the people in the land of Israel. Nehemiah was knowledgeable and experienced in administering Persian institutions necessary for government. The great majority of the people were abject poor. They were heavily burdened by cost-of-living pressures, particularly, food, interest rates, and taxes. They were completely demoralised. For Australians, selling yourself or your children into slavery was never an option!

As their governor, Nehemiah numbered the people according to their Judean town of origin. Some of the people were unable to provide evidence of their origin and were excluded. Nehemiah gave the people relief from interest and taxes for twelve years and did not take the food levy which was

his due as governor. The people worked to defend and feed themselves: rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and producing food from their fields. They had goals to achieve but they needed more.

The people knew that they were Israelites by blood, but the Babylonian exiles from they were descended had been alienated from themselves. The people were disparate, lacking unity and knowledge of themselves as a people. They no longer knew their historical writings which told them who they were meant to be or how to act.

Spiritually, the people felt disoriented, confused, blind. Then, in the seventh month, Ezra read the Torah, the Law, to all the people who could understand, and it was interpreted for them by the Levites. The people wept in remorse. Perhaps part of that was also a sense of coming home to themselves. Ezra, Nehemiah, and the priestly Levites said to all the people "... this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." The people, restored to their land, had their spiritual and religious sight restored. Ezra and Nehemiah gave them God's acceptance, forgiveness, and vision of how to live in unity as one people, God's people.

The vision we seek to realise out of love for our own disparate people, Australians, and to share with the peoples of neighbouring lands, was articulated by Jesus reading from a scroll in a synagogue in Nazareth of the Galilee.

Luke 4:14-21

In the gospel according to Luke, Jesus returned to his hometown, Nazareth, went to synagogue on the sabbath as he usually did, stood up to read, as any male member of the congregation might do, and was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and read (mostly Chapter 61):

"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."

After handing back the scroll, Jesus sat down to teach, to give the interpretation. He began by saying "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." He was telling them that he fulfilled the Law and the Prophets. See how closely he followed the outline from the Memoir of Nehemiah: relief for the poor, captives released to gather in their land, the Law to give light for the people to see how to worship the Lord and unified by the Law, to live

joyfully as a people in freedom and dignity. Jesus ended by proclaiming to the congregation in summary that now was the year of the Lord's favour, a way of saying a Jubilee year. Redemption and restoration were to come to all through him, through his life, death, and resurrection.

I Corinthians 12:12-31

We were called to bring this good news of the redemption and restoration that Jesus Christ brings to all who believe in him. From the passage today from St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, we understand the importance of respecting the differing gifts we have for the work set before us. Unity in Christ strengthens and encourages us to pursue the vision and continue to make it a reality in the world, bringing light and hope.

Conclusion.

We Australians have built schools and hospitals where there were none; made medical breakthroughs; shipped grain and produce to those struck by famine; coal, gas, and wool to those suffering the cold of European winters.

Today, we may pray for all Australians.
'We bless you, God of the universe, for this land,
for its contrasts of landscape and climate,
for its abundance of wealth and opportunity.
We bless you for our history,
with all its struggles in adversity,
its courage and hope.
Give us tolerance and respect for each other
and a passionate commitment to justice for all.
Bless us so that we might be a blessing to other nations.
We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**'
(A.P.B.A. p. 204)