

## Readings for Bible Sunday

19<sup>th</sup> November 2023

### First Reading: Nehemiah 8:1-4a, 8-12

All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. Accordingly, Ezra the priest 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. Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose.

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." So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved." And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

### Second Reading: Colossians 3:12-17

Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

### Gospel: St Matthew 24:30-35

Jesus said to his disciples:

"The sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see 'the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven' with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

## A Reflection for Bible Sunday

Today we are keeping Bible Sunday, a day promoted by The Bible Society specifically to celebrate the gift of God's Word. It is one of those flexible days – the Bible Society suggests that it is kept on the last Sunday in October, but we were keeping All Saints that Sunday, and it can be kept on any convenient Sunday. Perhaps it is appropriate that, as we come towards the end of the church year (the Feast of Christ the King, the last Sunday in the year, is next Sunday), we celebrate God's Word that sustains us throughout the year and throughout our lives.

The Bible is one of those constants in our Christian lives. Week by week, our services have the Liturgy of the Word followed by the Liturgy of the Sacrament. The Bible tells us the story of God and God's people, it provides guidance on how we should live our lives according to God's will, it reminds us again and again of God's love and God's promises to his people. And we have examples of all those in today's readings.

In the passage from Nehemiah, we hear part of the story of God's people as they returned from exile in Babylon and started to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. In Colossians, as part of his guidance on Christian living, Paul writes of being forgiven and therefore being forgiving, loving, peaceful and thankful. And then he says: 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly'. Isn't that a beautiful thought? It's that same 'word' that, in our Gospel reading, Jesus promises will never pass away, even though at the end of time everything else as we know it, heaven and earth, will pass away. That word of Christ, the word of God, is to dwell in us richly, to be such an essential part of us, that it enriches our lives and guides our every moment.

There is much in all these passages to think about, but today I want to focus on Nehemiah. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah appear very little in our three-year cycle of readings on Sundays. These Scriptures, which appear as two books in our Bibles, are one book in the Jewish Scriptures, and were one in the western Christian tradition until the 15<sup>th</sup> century. They are closely related, both telling of the return of God's people from exile to Judah. As we hear in today's reading, Ezra was the priest and scribe, and Nehemiah was the governor of the province of Judah.

Some history helps us understand today's passage. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had conquered Judah early in the sixth century BCE and took many of the people of Judah into exile in Babylon. This was understood by the people as a punishment from God for their failure to keep to their covenant relationship with God or to heed the warnings of the prophets to repent. Later in that century, Babylon was conquered by the Persian king, Cyrus. After about seventy years in exile, Cyrus allowed the people to return to Jerusalem and start rebuilding the city and Temple, also returning to them the treasure that had been plundered from the Temple and giving them resources and livestock. This return didn't happen all at once but took place over several decades.

Their return was not without its difficulties. The people who had moved into the area in their absence viewed the returning exiles with suspicion and hostility. The foundation of the new Temple was laid but work then stopped in the face of opposition. Further authority for the rebuilding work was sought and obtained from Babylon, now ruled by king Darius. The events we read of in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are thought to have taken place in the middle of the fifth century BCE, so about fifty years after the return of the first group, when Ezra returned with another large group of exiles. Then Nehemiah, a Jew in service to the Persian king, heard of the difficulties faced by the exiles who had returned to Jerusalem and also sought permission to go there. Initially, he organised the rebuilding

of the walls to secure the city, and then held a great ceremony. We hear about the beginning of this ceremony in today's reading.

At the ceremony, we are told that the priest Ezra read from the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel. The law of Moses is the books we now know as the first five books of our Bible, Genesis to Deuteronomy. We are told that Ezra read from early in the morning until midday – so about 6 hours – that's quite a thought for us today! Especially so as this initial ceremony was followed shortly afterwards by the Festival of Booths, at which the Scriptures were read for eight days!

The books that were read from were not books as we would know them. They would have been scrolls and few people would have had their own copies. Therefore, hearing the Scriptures read aloud would have been the only way that most people would have had access to them. Having been in exile, for most people this would have been the first time they would have heard them, and we are told that they were read 'with interpretation'. Scripture can be difficult and, then as now, we all need help in understanding God's word and applying it to our own lives.

I think it is probably fair to say that, in this day and age, few people read and study the Scriptures to the extent we see here, even though we have easy and instantaneous access to them. Probably professional theologians do. That's not a criticism. After all, the people we read of here may have had an intensive study period for two weeks, but for most of them that would have been it until the next festival at the Temple – perhaps a year later if they could get there, maybe longer. But this story is a reminder of the importance of reading and studying the Bible with proper interpretation that remains to this day, as it is one of the ways in which God speaks to us and guides us.

As the people heard God's word, most for the first time, we are told that they wept. It was a moment of realisation of how far separated they had become from God, how far they were from the way that God wanted them to live their lives as God's people. But that was important because with that realisation came the opportunity for a new beginning. It was, as the Levites, the teachers, told them, 'a holy day', a day to celebrate their understanding of God's word.

Today, on Bible Sunday, we celebrate the gift of God's Word to us – the written word of the Scriptures which leads us to the Living Word of God in Jesus, and has the ability to transform lives as it did for those returning exiles so many years ago. Maybe this celebration is even an incentive to renew our acquaintance with the Scriptures more regularly.

In the Houses of Parliament in London, inlaid into the floor in Latin, are words from Psalm 127 which translate as 'Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain.'<sup>\*</sup> It is a reminder that whether we are, metaphorically, building a house that governs the nation, or the house of our own lives, that it is God and God's Word that provides the stability and structure we need.

<sup>\*</sup> with thanks to the Bible Society for this information.