

**Sermon for 27<sup>th</sup> January 2019.**

**Readings:**

**First Reading: Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10**

**Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a**

**Gospel: Luke 4: 14-21**

Imagine an invasion of your land

A battle ensues and your capital city is taken by enemy forces.

Homes, religious buildings, everything has been destroyed. And you are forced to leave the city.

Imagine vast winding trains of refugees on foot, travelling with only the possessions they can carry, making their way to a new and very different life.

Only the poorest and sickest stay behind; unable to make the long journey, they try to live on in the place they once called home.

Imagine trying to rebuild your life in a new place.

Maybe you even find work and build a family.

But still, you long for home...

For the place you left...

For the country you loved...

Imagine hearing occasional snippets of news.

Imagine wondering whether it is safe to return.

Imagine constantly feeling torn between the home you once had and the home you've rebuilt for yourself. If it ever became safe, would you go back? Or would you stay in the place your family had now grown up and settled in...?

Imagine...

In one way or another, it is the story of many millions of people who have left their homeland and become refugees.

Today is Holocaust Memorial Day. It is a chance to remember the stories of the many who have died in the Holocaust and subsequent genocides; such as Rwanda, Darfur and Cambodia. And an opportunity to remember the stories of those who have fled violence, wars and genocides in their own country, to make a home elsewhere. Sadly, it is a story we are still telling. It is the story of Rohingya Muslims streaming out Myanmar and the story of thousands of refugees still climbing into unsafe boats to cross dangerous seas, desperate to seek a life free from danger of death... It is a story that sadly keeps repeating itself...

And it is also the story of the Jewish population of Judah, living over two and a half thousand years ago...

Judah is a small fish in a big pond. It is surrounded by bigger and more powerful nations; particularly those of Egypt and Babylon. The capital city of Jerusalem has been under siege twice in ten years. Famine is so severe in the capital city that there is nothing for the people to eat. Then the soldiers break through the city walls. The king is captured and bound, his sons are killed in front of him. Neither young man, nor young woman, nor old man nor aged are spared from the onslaught<sup>1</sup>. After carrying off all that is precious, the attacks sets alight fires in the temple, the holiest of places, and it is destroyed completely<sup>2</sup>. Then all who have escaped the sword are carried off into exile in Babylon. All except a small remnant of the most poor and needy, who wouldn't have survived the journey and wouldn't have been much use to their captors...

No wonder that *at the rivers of Babylon they sat down and wept*<sup>3</sup>....

Many years later, we meet Nehemiah, son of Hachabiah, who has lived in exile in Susa. As cupbearer to the King, he is always listening out for news of his homeland. Has it managed to recover yet, from the gut-wrenching desolation? Then one day, some men come from Judah and Nehemiah asks them about Jerusalem and those who have survived the exile. And he hears of troubles back home, of the walls of Jerusalem being broken down and gates burnt up. And he weeps for his homeland.

And I wonder, how many people today are still weeping for the place they call home and what it has become....

And then Nehemiah prays. He confesses his sins and the sins of the whole community and he prays that he will be attentive to what God wants. He listens before he takes action...

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Kings 25

<sup>2</sup> 2 Chronicles 36

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 137

Nehemiah always puts a brave face on things; he has never shown his sorrow for his homeland in front of his boss, the King. But one day, as he brings wine to the King, his sorrow shows. And the King asks him why there such sadness in his heart.

And even though he is afraid, Nehemiah speaks of the city where his fathers are buried.., of the city that now lies in ruins. In fear and trembling, Nehemiah prays to God and then asks the King; if he has found any favour in his sight, then please might he go back to that city in Judah, to rebuild it...

And the King agrees... And not only that, he promises safe passage and timber to help rebuild.

I wonder how he felt? How anyone who is on the cusp of going home must have felt...

And so begins a community project, to rebuild the walls of that great city of Jerusalem. There are troubles on the way, as the Jews are insulted and mocked for this foolish project. But the community stay strong, praying to God for protection .

Then the community begins to rebel against the costliness of the rebuilding project; they wonder why they've spent so much time and energy on this project... But Nehemiah continues to share his vision with the people; putting his own money into supporting the community that is suffering and persuading other nobles and officials to do likewise.

And, at last, the work is over. The walls is built dnd Jerusalem opens the gates; some 50000 people return.. home...

And then, comes our reading for today... Having rebuilt the city, they also need to rebuild the people. A people who have been scattered..

Some have managed to remain faithful to God, but many have forgotten even the most basic elements of their faith. Their identity has broken down; just like it might for all those who have been dispossessed.... They've forgotten what it means to be God's chosen people.

And so, they gather. And the scribe Ezra reads to them from early morning to midday. Some 5 or 6 hours... And alongside him are teachers; helping to interpret and unpack the meaning for the people. Helping them understand the essence of the law of Moses, helping them remember all that they have forgotten, bringing them back to their primary identity; not as scattered people in exile, but as children of their one heavenly father.

This act of worship becomes central to bringing the people back together; central to reforming them and renewing them as a people... As Nehemiah challenges Israel to read the Law again, it takes them beyond the bitterness of the exile they have endured and, through those sacred texts, hope shines out and fills their hearts. And the people respond with 'Amen, Amen' and they bow down, with their faces to the ground, worshipping the Lord.

And I wonder how often we let worship transform our lives... Because here, for the Israelites, the reading and unpacking of the word of God really is transformative for the people. In that moment of transformation, the people weep; maybe in sadness for how far they had fallen, maybe with regret at all the years they had been away, maybe in joy at the rebuilding of their heritage and home. And then Nehemiah tells them to turn their mourning into celebration; he urges them to worship God, to eat and drink good things and to share all those good things with those who have less... In other words, at this key moment as they come together again in their holy city, Nehemiah reminds them of their twin calling as God's people; to love God and to love and care for those in need.

There are people out there who might say that this book is outdated and irrelevant. But today, as we remember the Holocaust and genocides and refugees being torn from home; we have a story of a war, and an exile and of refugees returning to their country. In other words, we have a story that shines hope into a very real current situation.

And I haven't even got started on the epistle; which speaks to a fractured community, filled with infighting; who need to be reminded that the unity in diversity is far more powerful than conformity.

Nor have I touched on the epiphany moment when 30 year old man returns home after 40 days in the desert and reads scripture about how God's justice works in the world and says "today this scriptures has been fulfilled in your hearing"...

There is good news dripping from ever book in our bible and there are stories that can inspire hope and renewal in our lives. If we let them, the stories of scripture can transform us just as much as they did that gathered community inside the newly rebuilt walls of Jerusalem. If we let them, these stories will lighten our darkness, will bring us moments of epiphany and moments of profound worship and will keep bringing us back to our primary calling to be one body, Christ's body, called to love God together and to stand up for God's love and justice in the world.

Let us pray;

Oh Lord, let your word be a lamp to our feet and a light to our paths and may we go out from today, knowing that the spirit is upon us. Amen.