

**Sunday 27th January 2019 "The joy of the Lord is your strength"**  
**Nehemiah 8:1-10 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 Luke 4:14-21**

Intro

2 weeks ago our sermon focussed on the reading from Isaiah 43 - Do not be afraid....

Who can finish the verse? Is 43:1

"Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by your name, you are mine!"

Last week, amongst other things, Penny taught us the significance of numbers in the Bible, especially how John chose to use them to point to the perfection of Jesus right at his first public miracle.

The whole of the Bible tells the incredible story of God's perfect, redeeming love for us, for all humanity and for His world

Those beautiful words that focussed our thinking 2 weeks ago were written by Isaiah about 700 years before Jesus was born Do not be afraid for I have redeemed you...

Our reading from Nehemiah today comes from a later time in the history of Israel - just 450 yrs BC Nehemiah was the governor and political leader under whose vision and leadership; the derelict walls of Jerusalem were re-built and the broken lives of the returning exiles were renewed as their faith was restored.

God's chosen people FINALLY were able to return to Jerusalem after their captivity in Babylon They came back a tired and broken people to an unsafe city but Nehemiah motivated the people in the rebuilding of the walls piece by piece, section by section (first 7 chapters of the book)

The people then gathered together in the square for worship and the prophet Ezra read from the book of the law of Moses.

Would like us to think about this passage for a moment...

Vs 1 ALL the people gathered together into the square before the WATER GATE

The location of the gathering - The Water Gate - is mentioned twice in just a few verses so it is clearly important. Why the square in front of the Water Gate?

Because it was a place that everyone could be present, even the ritually unclean...In the Temple or one of the synagogues, people had to be ritually clean to attend. Here, in the square all could gather together. We are told that the gathering included men, women and children - all who could understand

And at the end of the reading, as the people leave, those who have brought food to celebrate should remember and share with those who had brought nothing

Worship then, as it is now, is for all the people of God to do TOGETHER

Yes - today we have Bibles of our own at home, some of us will have multiple copies as well as electronic versions on our phones, computers or other devices

Yes - we can listen to pod casts of sermons from around the world

We can listen to CD's of the Bible or of sung worship in the car

But there is no substitute for gathering together, in person, for worship

Even Jesus, we are told in our gospel reading today, went to the synagogue on the sabbath day AS WAS HIS CUSTOM

If it is good enough for Jesus.... why should it not be good enough for us

Vs 2&3 Ezra brought the book of the law of Moses and read it from early morning until mid-day  
This was the the Torah or the Pentateuch - the first 5 books of our Bible (Genesis - Deuteronomy)  
Ezra opened the Scriptures, he prayed, and the people fell prostrate on the ground in response  
to the reading of God's word

Something of God's awesome, overpowering, mysterious presence was experienced in the  
reading of Scripture

Hebrews 4:12 says

*Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it  
divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the  
heart.*

Is that our experience, our expectation?

Listen to this quote that I read this week from a writer Annie Dillar... I wonder what you think of it!  
"Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke?... It is madness to  
wear ladies' straw hats or velvet hats to church; we should be wearing crash helmets. Ushers (or  
vergers or welcomers) should issue life jackets and signal flares; they should tie us to our pews.  
For the sleeping god may wake some day and take offence, or the waking god may draw us out to  
where we can never return"

The worship of the gathered people was focused upon the word of God.

There was instruction so that all the people could understand, maybe from Hebrew to the more  
commonly spoken Aramaic or maybe words of explanation passage by passage

But instruction so that all could understand.

Our God speaks, in many ways but certainly through scripture. Is that our expectation? and  
how well do we listen?

And finally in this passage, looking at the worship of God's people we see that their lives were  
transformed.

This great crowd of people gathered together to listen attentively to scripture and were transformed  
by its powerful words and the presence of God

They gathered together, listened to the living word, they received instruction, they bowed their  
heads in worship and they wept.

It is not clear what the reason for their tears was

Maybe they were tears of regret - the Torah had been lost in exile

Maybe they were reminded of how far their lives had shifted from God's expectations of them

Maybe they were tears of joy for the recovery of the Torah and the sense of God's abiding  
presence with them

Maybe it could be any one or all of these combined.

Encountering the living presence of our awesome, loving, redeeming God is transforming and  
convicting and overwhelming.

The books of the law, given to Moses and read aloud by Ezra were a gift from God mapping out a  
way of living, a path that would lead to fullness of life. Not out of legalism but a God given  
promise of His love and calling and redemption.

Once they saw the people's reaction Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and the Levites told the people not to weep or mourn but go away and eat and drink in celebration, remembering to give to those who had nothing prepared for celebrating because that day was holy.

Interesting that today is many of us are going out to dinner together :-)

God's story of redemption had been re-heard. It had transformed those that listened to it and it was now a day for celebrating. Celebrating the redeeming love of God

The consistent narrative all through the scriptures is that our God is pure and Holy, the effects of sin are devastating and God's redeeming love is such that He fiercely reaches out to His people, especially those who are oppressed or suffer injustice.

The story of God's redemption is a long one - the whole of the Old Testament

39 books

929 chapter

23145 verses

30 authors

1000+ years to write

Luke's unique account of Jesus, teaching in the synagogue, is Luke conveying to his reader the identity of Jesus.

Jesus, the teaching rabbi for that sabbath stands up in front of the people, reads from the scroll He is given which in our Bible is Isaiah 61

He reads these well known words

"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."

He then sits down to start His teaching and tells them

Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing

He is the long awaited Messiah, the one through whom God's promised redemption, written about by Isaiah, heard by the people with Nehemiah, would be made wholly possible.

He was the one who had come to redeem them, the world and us

We started off by remembering the words of Isaiah 43 = He has redeemed us, He has called us by name

This morning's OT passage ends with the words 'Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.' Nehemiah 8:10

Jesus came to fulfil the Law, His death and resurrection makes possible our redemption.

So may we, today, find joy and strength in that assurance

Amen