

## **Bible Readings**

### **Nehemiah 8**

8 And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. <sup>2</sup> So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. <sup>3</sup> And 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. <sup>4</sup> And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. <sup>5</sup> And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. <sup>6</sup> And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. <sup>7</sup> Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiiah, the Levites, [\[a\]](#) helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. <sup>8</sup> They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, [\[b\]](#) and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

<sup>9</sup> 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 as they heard the words of the Law. <sup>10</sup> Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

### **Luke 4:14-21**

<sup>14</sup> And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country. <sup>15</sup> And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all.

<sup>16</sup> And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. <sup>17</sup> And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

<sup>18</sup> "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives  
and recovering of sight to the blind,

to set at liberty those who are oppressed,  
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

20 And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

## **Sermon**

### **...and He taught in their synagogues.**

*"For hundreds of years, Christians have told their story with a key element missing. The key element in question is the calling and subsequent story of Israel. Not long ago I saw a book in which the author made a great deal out of saying that we need to understand the story of the scripture. Yes, indeed, I thought, but when I looked inside the book, the story I found went like this:*

*1 God made the world 2 humans sinned 3 God sent Jesus 4 that's ok then.*

*But telling the story like that leaves a big hole in the middle: what about God's call of Israel? What happened to the Old Testament, which Paul insists is foundational for the gospel?" (page 6 'Into the Heart of Romans', by Tom Wright)*

Jesus, who in our New Testament passage reads in the synagogue in Nazareth, was an Israelite. Our Redeemer was a Jew and He reads from the Torah (instruction; teaching from God), just as Ezra does in our Old Testament reading.

Ezra was a scribe who had deep knowledge of the Torah. Ezra reads from it; from the Law of God as it was given to Israel through Moses, in the wilderness. God remained faithful to Israel. He guided Israel through the barren land of the desert to the promised land. He remained faithful despite Israel's lack of trust in God. When they were in the land, they failed to live according to the Torah. The consequence of that was exile to Babylonia.

It would have given the Israelites time to think, to contemplate their sins, to realise that it was because of their disobedience that they ended up in Babylonia.

In our passage the time of exile had passed. They had returned home, the temple was being rebuilt. It was crucial that they had learned from the exile and that they would not make the same mistake. In other words, it was crucial that they would *return* to God; to His instructions; to their way of life as God had set out in the Torah. But guidance was needed for that. And that guidance came from Ezra, whose forefather was Aaron, Moses's brother.

The Torah is opened and read.

*And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam, on his left hand.*

With Ezra, that makes 2x 7 people in total. The number seven is a key number in Israel: it is the number that represents fullness. Here Israel is gathered as one.

It is a moment in Israel's story that is filled with the Holy One. A moment in which the symbolic number of seven, signifying completeness, is quietly and mysteriously present in the presence of two times seven people. With this description, the wholeness of Israel is represented by the people who are standing side by side next to Ezra. The moment is filled with reverence for God....

A moment of a new beginning for Israel with God. A new beginning given to them by the grace of God.

*And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. <sup>6</sup> And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. (Nehemiah 8:5,6)*

What Ezra reads is then explained to the people by the Levites. And then the people are overwhelmed by grief...? Why...? Well, they had returned home, to Jerusalem, the temple being restored. But more than that, together they *return to God*. To return to God, that is so much more. That is everything, and that does not happen without one's soul being deeply touched.

Israelite or Gentile, when you realise how far away you have wandered from Him; how you have detached yourself from Him, and when you then return and meet Him again and are received by Him....that touches your inner being.

Ezra sees the emotions, sees the tears, the repentance and says,

*Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." (Nehemiah 8:10)*

Now we turn to Nazareth.

'Can anything good from Nazareth?' The person who asks this question thinks that nothing good can come from Nazareth. It is a question filled with cynicism, and it takes us to the beginning of Jesus' ministry, when He called His first disciples. Jesus had the first two, Andrew and Peter, and then He found Philip. Philip found Nathanael.

Philip said to Nathanael,

*"We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph (John 1:45)."*

We hear joy in Philip's words. However, the response to Philip's joy is this,

<sup>46</sup>*"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"*

Philip is not put off, he says to Nathanael

*“Come and see.” (John 1: 45-46)*

Nathanael went with Philip. When Jesus saw Nathanel coming towards Him He said to Nathanael,

*“Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!”*

Nazareth, it's the town where Jesus grew up, where He had His childhood. In today's reading, Jesus is in the synagogue in Nazareth.

He unrolled the scroll that was given to Him and then reads the words of Isaiah,

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me*

*to proclaim good news to the poor.*

*He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives  
and recovering of sight to the blind,*

*to set at liberty those who are oppressed,*

*<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4: 18,19)*

Unlike after Ezra's reading, there is no explanation of what Jesus just read. Instead, there is a moment of silence. Jesus silently rolled the scroll up and sat down. Then, instead of helping the people of Nazareth in the synagogue to understand what He read, Jesus says:

*Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:21)*

In the synagogue, adult Jews have the opportunity to read the Torah. But Jesus did more. He taught. He was a Rabbi; the Rabbi of all rabbis. The words of Isaiah with which the Jews in the synagogue were familiar, had been *realised* by Jesus.

Can anything good come from Nazareth...?

The *fulfilment* of the words that the Prophet Isaiah spoke, long before Jesus was born...that was the Good that came from Nazareth; the Good that had come down from heaven.