

EPIPHANY 3C 23012022 Aboriginal Sunday *The Revd. Lorna Green*

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31; Luke 4:14-21

Nehemiah: All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra 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. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen', lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. 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.'

In the book of Nehemiah, we read about the exiled people of Israel returning to Jerusalem to begin rebuilding the Temple. They began to rebuild the infrastructure of their society and their religion. At one point they asked the priest Ezra to read the Books of the Law to them; while they were in exile in Babylon, they didn't have access to the scrolls of the Law.

Ezra stood on a specially built platform in front of all the men and women and children and read to them from the Torah, the Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. He read to them for about six hours straight.

The people were devastated by what they heard from scripture. They were cut to the heart and convicted of their own shortcomings; hearing the scripture had a profound effect on them. Their priest needed to reassure them of God's love and forgiveness.

In today's Gospel reading we heard about Jesus reading from scripture to people who knew him well. He read a piece from Isaiah, which would have been familiar to his listeners as a prophecy about the messiah they all longed for. Luke tells us that 'the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him': they were all paying very close attention. He sat down to preach, as was the custom, and dropped his bombshell, telling them that today this scripture was fulfilled because HE was the one Isaiah was talking about.

Next week we will hear how those people in his hometown responded to Jesus; spoiler alert, it wasn't in a good way.

Even so, this incident and the story from Nehemiah show us people who took scripture seriously; they listened carefully and thoughtfully. They expected to be challenged, disturbed, and affected by God's word. Do we? Do we really *expect* to learn new things when we read or listen to scripture? Do we think carefully about it, wonder what it means, ask God to show us what it means, and expect God to speak to us through the Bible?

The brilliant analogy of the Body of Christ being like a human body made up of many different parts is given to us in the first letter to the Corinthians. The writer imagines the church as the body of Christ which joins together people of every kind and goes on to explain how dependant we are on one another.

Martin Luther King Jr said, in 1967, "We must develop a world perspective. No individual can live alone; no nation can live alone, and as long as we try, the more we are going to have war in this world. . . ."

It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. We are made to live together because of the interrelated structure of reality."

Perhaps the global pandemic through which we are living has shown us once again how much we need other people, and how much our actions can affect the lives of others.

Today as we remember Aboriginal Sunday, we can consider our relationship to the First Nations peoples of this country in light of what scripture teaches us.

When the people listened to Ezra reading from the Law they realised how far they had strayed from the life God wanted for them, and they pledged to turn back to God in repentance.

When non-indigenous Australians see, hear, or read about the history of colonisation and its effects on the people who were living here when the boats came, are we cut to the heart?

When we understand the generational trauma that comes from taking children away from their families, do we turn to God to ask, "What can we do?"

When we realise that none of the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Indigenous Deaths in Custody has been fully implemented, and in the 30 years since that Royal Commission there have been another 500 deaths, should we turn to God in repentance?

Today as we ponder the sad statistics and stories, we also need to look for hope, because with God there is always hope.

As more people recognise our interconnectedness, our dependence on one another, and the wisdom of people who have lived on this country for millennia, surely we will listen to that wisdom with more care and respect.

We have lessons to learn from those who have cared for this part of God's creation for so long. We can learn to celebrate and be proud that we live in a place that has the oldest living culture in the world.

We are learning what it means to be inclusive- in our church, in our communities, in our country and in our world.

We have come a long way but there is still a way to go.

Stan Grant, in his 2017 book "Talking to my Country", wrote this about his experience of growing up as an Aboriginal person:

"We were the blacks. So easily recognised not just by the colour of our skin but by the whiff of desperation and danger we cloaked ourselves in.

And as I grew older I pieced together the truth that we didn't choose this. We are the detritus of the brutality of the Australian frontier.

As Australia welcomed waves of migrants and built a rich, diverse, tolerant society, we remained a reminder of what was lost, what was taken, what was destroyed to scaffold the building of this nation's prosperity.

We survived the 'smoothing of the dying pillow' of extermination to end up on the bottom rung of the ladder of assimilation. Too many of us remain there still."

The returning exiles in Jerusalem wept when they realised how far they had strayed from God's dream for them: but Nehemiah told them not to be sad, but to rejoice 'for the joy of the Lord is your strength.'

Those people long ago didn't know where they had gone wrong until they heard the truth in the scripture. Many or most of us had no idea of the true history of colonisation, or of what First Nations people experienced and continue to experience, because we were not taught about it.

Now we can learn and understand- not so that we can mourn or beat ourselves up, but so that we can be glad to know the truth and can make sure our children and grandchildren know too.

Then we can turn to God. If we have or had negative attitudes or prejudices towards Aboriginal people, we turn to God in repentance. And we continue to ask what needs to change- in ourselves and in our parish.

Here is a prayer from our prayer book for Australia Day:

Bounteous God,
we give thanks for this ancient and beautiful land,
a land of despair and hope,
a land of wealth and abundant harvests,
a land of fire, drought, and flood.
We pray that your Spirit may continue to move in this land
and bring forgiveness, reconciliation,
and an end to all injustice;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.