
Today, in Your Hearing, the Gospel is Proclaimed

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 26 January 2025

Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,8-10 • 1 Corinthians 12:12-19 • Luke 4:14-21



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

The first time I attended a Sunday church service, not just a wedding or a funeral, was right here in Christchurch, at the old Cathedral in the Square. Peter Beck was the Dean then. He was always very open, spending the last few minutes before the service began by walking up and down the aisles, shaking hands and greeting people. That was a great thing to do and made me feel very welcome. The service itself was a little confusing to a newbie, but I was with Melissa, and she is a cradle Lutheran, so she knew what was going on. Also, I love to sing, so I enjoyed the hymns. And of course the choir was always wonderful.

That service was essentially the same one we do here, made up of songs, Bible readings, prayers, a sermon — all the basic elements. I thought about this as I was reading the Bible passages for this week. Two of them — and really all of them, but particularly the Nehemiah and Luke readings — are about church

services. The first one, in Nehemiah, is a very special church service, for it is the first big gathering of the Jews after they returned from exile. In that service, which was led by Ezra, the priest and scribe, three things happened:

- ❖ Ezra read from the Bible — for about six hours!, from dawn to noon
- ❖ Ezra and the scribes explained the reading “so that the people could understand it”
- ❖ The people prayed and worshipped

This is quite similar to what we do, isn't it? No, our readings are not six hours long. I think our wonderful readers might object to that! I suppose back then they all knew how to pronounce all those strange names. But we hear from the Bible. We have a sermon, which is to help us understand what the Bible is saying, and hopefully, relate it to our lives today. And of course we pray.

There is also an element of celebration and fellowship. At the end of the Nehemiah reading, Ezra tells the people not to mourn or cry, but to go home and share a feast with their neighbours. This is not unlike what we do, having a cup of tea or coffee and something to eat. The fellowship is important, as it helps to bind us together as a congregation, as the people of God. As Ezra says, and we might also say, on any given Sunday:

Today is holy to our Lord, so don't be sad. The joy that the Lord gives you
will make you strong. (Nehemiah 8:10)

The joy of meeting in the name of the Lord is ours.

In the Gospel reading, also, we are witnesses to a service, this time in the synagogue. The reflection from the theologian Darrell Bock which I put in the pew sheet this week talks about the synagogue service. There is a recitation of the Shema, which is a statement of faith, similar to our creed. There are prayers. There are readings from the Bible. There is an exposition of the text, like our sermon; and the service ends with a blessing.

In that particular synagogue on that particular day, Jesus stands up to read from Isaiah, and then speaks about the reading. This is of course no ordinary sermon, for Jesus tells the assembled men that he himself is the subject of Isaiah's prophecy. His sermon continues beyond the passage we are reading today, as Jesus reveals more about himself. Imagine the surprise, consternation and then anger of the men who heard this speech. It is as if I stood here and told you that I am the Suffering Servant you've heard about, or that I'm really Jesus' “beloved disciple”. It was worse than idle boasting; it was madness. It was sacrilege to them.

Jesus was handed the scroll which contained the Book of Isaiah and chose that particular reading carefully. It is a preview of Jesus' mission on earth, and appropriate for him to read as he begins that mission. He claims several things.

- ❖ God's Spirit is upon him. He is the one chosen and empowered to carry out what God has ordained. Using the old prophecy from Isaiah is a forceful way to claim legitimacy in the eyes of the synagogue Jews. They will all have been familiar with the passage, and were anticipating the day when God would make it come true.
- ❖ He is to bring good news to the poor, and indeed that is why he was sent. The Good News is the Gospel of salvation for all people.
- ❖ He will bring freedom to the oppressed and imprisoned, and healing to all, no matter what their affliction. Bringing eyesight to the physically blind is something he specifically does in his ministry; he also brings revelation and awareness to the spiritually blind.
- ❖ And he will bring salvation to his people. When? Now — the time has come, he says.

It is not part of our reading today, but Jesus goes on to imply that he has come to all people, not just the Jews. They are not ready for this message yet, so he does not speak it plainly; but later on, he will.

Jesus' reading and proclamation is not well-accepted. The Jews chase him out of the city and try to throw him off a cliff. Such is the treatment of one who upsets the status quo, even with good news! It is a sign of worse treatment to come.

And now, today, in our church service, we too continue to proclaim the Good News. For how long? Christians have been doing just that for almost two thousand years. Will the work ever be done? Not until all the world has heard the Gospel and given the chance to accept Jesus' message of salvation. We don't know when that will be. In the meantime, styles of services will change; they have been changing over all that time. But some things will remain constant, for they are ordained by Jesus: the reading of the Bible, the explanation of the reading, and the prayer and fellowship of Christians gathered together. These are truly gifts from God, for they enable us to come closer to God. Let us give thanks. Amen.