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# Ezra and Nehemiah Revive the Faith

## Biblical Reflection for 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, JAN. 20, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- Today's first reading is taken from the Book of Nehemiah, a book that tells of the reconstitution of the Jewish community after the Exile, the dispersion and the destruction of Jerusalem.

It tells the story of the new beginnings of a community and is full of hope, even through great difficulties still loomed ahead. The priest, Ezra, and a layman, Nehemiah, lived in the time when the people of Israel had been returned to their land after the years of the Babylonian Captivity and it was clearly a time of rebuilding. The people had lost the connections to their faith.

Ezra and Nehemiah were commissioned by the Lord to teach what had been lost, to rebuild the communal structures, to inspire the people once again to the high ideals of their Jewish faith -- so that they could begin to live a healthy social and religious life.

The moving scene depicted in today's first reading was the moment of the public re-proclamation of the law on which this community's life was based. The gathered assembly listened to this proclamation in a deeply spiritual atmosphere. Some began to weep for joy at being able once again to listen freely to the Word of God after the tragedy of the destruction of Jerusalem and to begin salvation history once again. Nehemiah cautioned them, saying that it was a feast day and that in order to have strength from the Lord, it was necessary to rejoice, expressing gratitude for God's gifts. Ultimately the Word of God is strength and joy.

What is our own reaction to this powerful scene? This reading is an invitation to each person, and especially to pastoral ministers, to thank God for his fidelity and his gifts and to thank all who have served as co-workers in rebuilding the foundations of our faith and our Church each day.

### Luke's pastoral strategy

The Gospel according to Luke is the only one of the synoptic gospels to begin with a literary prologue (1:1-4). Luke acknowledges his debt to earlier eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, but claims that his contribution is a complete and accurate account, told in an orderly manner, and intended to provide Theophilus ("friend of God") and other readers with certainty about earlier teachings they have received. Luke is not telling people that what they previously learned was wrong. Rather, he confirms them in their faith, affirms them in their desire to know more about Jesus, and also puts things in order for them so that faith will be strengthened. Such a pastoral strategy is still very effective in transmitting the faith today.

### Hometown boy returns

Luke is not the only evangelist who records Jesus' visit to Nazareth "where he had been brought up" (4:16).

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Mark and Matthew also refer to this episode, although without mentioning the name of the town, referred to simply as "his home town" (Mark 6:1; Matthew 13:54). There are however several differences between the story told by Luke and those of Mark and Matthew. In Mark, Jesus' visit to his home town is found not at the beginning of his ministry, but after a long period of preaching the Gospel and healing, even after the discourse in parables (4:1-34) and the resurrection of Jairus' daughter (5:21-43). In Matthew, Jesus has also already pronounced his address on mission to the "Twelve Apostles" (10:2-42).

Luke chose to give this episode first place in his narration of the ministry of Jesus. At first sight we could think that it was Luke's intention to correct the chronology of Mark and Matthew. A detail of his story demonstrates however that this supposition is incorrect: As Jesus preaches he says that the people in Nazareth will say to him: "We have heard all that has happened in Capernaum, do the same here in your own countryside" (4:23). These words show that before going to Nazareth, Jesus had begun his ministry in Capernaum and had already provoked great admiration among the people, to the point that his fame had reached Nazareth.

### An electric moment

When Jesus stood in the Nazareth synagogue, it was an "electric" moment. He took the Isaiah scroll and began to read from chapter 61. The text from Isaiah was taken from a collection of poems about the last days, which foretold the redemption of Jerusalem and symbolized the renewal of the people of Israel. When these words are placed on Jesus' lips, they identify him as the messianic prophet of the final times, and they announce his mission: to proclaim the Good News, liberate men and women, and tell them of God's grace. The whole of Jesus' ministry therefore must be understood in this perspective.

Unrolling the scroll he found the place where it is written: "The spirit of the Lord has been given to me!" (4:16-18; Is 61:1). Very significantly the last line of Isaiah read by Jesus says: "to proclaim the Lord's year of favor" (4:19; Is 61:2), and immediately afterwards, Jesus' message was a declaration that precisely "this text" was being fulfilled on that day. The expression of Isaiah 61:2 "year of the Lord's favor" clearly refers to the prescriptions in the Book of Leviticus on the jubilee year (Leviticus 25:10-13).

Luke's story of Jesus in the synagogue does not quote the whole phrase of Isaiah, which includes two compliments of the object after the verb "proclaim" in Is 61:2. The Gospel quotes only the first ("the Lord's year of favor") neglecting the second which is "a day of vengeance for our God". The prophecy of Isaiah foresees two aspects of divine intervention, the first the liberation of the Jewish people, the other punishment of her enemies. The Gospel has not retained this opposition. The omission clearly has two consequences: a) the message contains nothing negative; b) it is implicitly universal. There is no suggestion of distinction between Jews and non-Jews. Universal openness is an essential character of the ministry and preaching of Jesus, especially in the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles.

Today's Gospel scene ends with Jesus telling his hearers that he is the fulfillment of the prophetic words of Isaiah. In asserting that his words are fulfilled "today," Jesus is saying in effect that the inauguration of his public ministry marks the beginning of the final times and the entry of divine salvation into human history. Through Jesus' own appropriation of Isaiah's words to his own ministry, he was reminding us that that history did not cover up the triumphs and disasters, the fidelities and infidelities of Israel throughout the ages. Rather, history made them stand out.

The time had come for Jesus to take history into his own hands, to confront it with his own person, to make a difference, and to remind his hearers that God had not abandoned their cries, their hopes, their sufferings, their dreams. God would fulfill them in his own Son who was standing in their very midst in the Nazareth synagogue. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah, bringing glad tidings and proclaiming liberty to captives. Not everyone will embrace this good news, as the rest of the Gospel will

show us.

### The failed evangelist

If we continue reading today's Gospel story, we realize that the mood of excitement, awe and wonder quickly change when the prophet of Nazareth doesn't speak the words that the local people wanted him to say. After Jesus sets forth the major points of his ministry in the opening scene in the Nazareth synagogue (Luke 4:16-21), the crowd grows terribly envious of one of their own and tries to get rid of him (4:22-30). Jesus did not succeed in making himself heard and understood and he had to depart in haste... for his life (4:30).

The first images of the ministry of Jesus are of a man who is defeated, unheeded and unwelcome. The people of Nazareth refused to hear his central message of liberation, freedom and reconciliation; they heard an approximation of it, highly colored by their own attitudes.

### Our response to God's Word

Like the people of Israel in the first reading, who gathered around the priest Ezra and listened to the word of God with deep emotion (Nehemiah 8:5), we, too stand to hear God's saving message and feel his presence in this and every liturgy. Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people, their hands raised high, answered: 'Amen, Amen'" (8:6). With this great "Amen" at the end of every Eucharistic prayer, we acknowledge the real presence on the altar, the living and eternal Word of the Father.

With the people gathered in the Nazareth synagogue, we, too, see and hear God's Word fulfilled in the person of Jesus, the Word made flesh. To this proclamation, our voices also cry out: "Amen." "I believe!" May the Spirit that anointed Jesus build us up into one body and send us forth to proclaim God's freedom and favor for all people.

[The readings for the 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time C are Nehemiah 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10; 1 Corinthians 12:12-30 or 12:12-14, 27; and Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21]

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